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ABSTRACT

Looping, or multi-year teaching, is the pedagogical practice of allowing students and teachers to remain together for 2 or more years. This 2-year case study investigated looping practices and perceptions of looping among eighth-grade middle school students, teachers, and parents. Data from two middle schools were collected in the second year of looping through interviews with 12 students, 4 teachers, and 11 parents; surveys of 214 students, 9 teachers, and 75 parents; and videotapes of looping classrooms. Findings revealed that 80 percent of participants reported positive results from looping related to ease of transition into eighth grade, enhanced sense of knowing about the students' needs, better accountability, more sustained peer and teacher-student relationships, more effective curriculum planning, and enhanced parent involvement. Twenty percent of students and parents preferred having different teachers every year. Students believed they should have a choice about looping. (Ten appendices include interview and survey questions and a compilation of student survey responses. Contains 183 references.) (Author/KB)

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"IN THE LOOP"

RESPONSES ABOUT LOOPING AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL AS SEEN THROUGH DIFFERENT LENSES

Deborah Lynn Kerr

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

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Abstract

This two-year case study investigated practices and perceptions of looping by 8th grade middle school students, teachers, and parents. The methodology included: 1) Interviews- 12- Students, 4-Teachers, 11-Parents; 2) Surveys- 214 students, 9-teachers and 75 parents; and 3) Videotaped looping classrooms. The research was conducted during the second year of looping. Summary of the research includes positive results in transition, sense of knowing, accountability, sustained relationships, curriculum planning, and enhanced parent involvement for 80% of the participants. Alternative perspectives were voiced by 20% of the participants, as they preferred different teachers every year. This study holds promise that looping relationships developed and nurtured over time create responsive learning environments to best meet the unique developmental needs of adolescents.

"IN THE LOOP"

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AS SEEN THROUGH DIFFERENT LENSES

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> True belonging is born of relationships not only to one another but also to a place of shared responsibilities and benefits. We love not so much what we have acquired as what we have made and whom we have made it with (p. 525).

I am sincerely appreciative of the relationships developed with the members of my doctoral committee. Special thanks to my professors: Co-chairs Joanne Rooney and Pamela Keating for challenging me to become a writer of purpose and clarity, Charles Thomas for your insights and encouragement that helped me to better understand my looping story, Sue Hansen for helping me to find my voice and the voices of my participants through this inquiry, and Cynthia Mee for your continued inspiration of middle school philosophy. Thank you for believing in me as we journeyed through this qualitative inquiry.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Looping is a pedagogical practice that provides the opportunity for students and teachers to stay together for two or more years. Looping is also referred to as multi-year teaching, teacher-student progressions, or a non-traditional grouping of students. The term looping in this dissertation is used to discuss an organizational pattern of grouping students. A teacher advances or "loops" with his or her students from one grade level to the next. A looping environment not only provides teachers with a deeper understanding of their students by continuously monitoring progress over a period of time but more importantly, looping provides the opportunity to develop and sustain relationships that can benefit students intellectually, emotionally, and socially. While the dynamics of developing relationships may differ from student to parent to teacher, looping provides the opportunity to form and develop relationships with all members of a school community. Looping can assist parents with enhanced communication, knowledge of shared expectations, and better understanding of schooling practices in general as the opportunity for forming relationships are extended in this setting.

This dissertation is a qualitative case study, which examines the "looping" concept with two different groups of 8th grade students, teachers, and parents at the middle level. I am most interested in how relationships developed during the looping configuration and the responses to this practice through the lenses of students, teachers, and parents during the 8th grade year.

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to determine: 1) How do relationships develop and sustain when middle school students and teachers stay together for more than one year? 2) To what extent do these looping relationships impact the context of

learning? 3) What are the responses of students, teachers, and parents to the looping experience in this middle school? 4) What consistent themes emerge regarding the experience of looping in this particular middle school? and 5) What relevance does looping have to the advocacy of middle school philosophy?

Through my interactions with the participants in this study I discovered how relationships develop when middle school students and teachers stay together for more than one year. I also learned to what extent these looping relationships impact the context of learning. Additionally, I discovered themes that consistently emerged throughout this looping experience for students, teachers, and parents that reinforce relationships that promote mutual respect, honesty, trust, and communication. Finally, I gained a deeper understanding on how looping practice reinforces the tenets of middle school philosophy that promote personalization, high expectations, and support among students, teachers, and parents in this organizational setting.

The methodology of the study is based primarily upon in-depth interviews, open and close ended surveys, and observation through video taping of looping classrooms, of the students, teachers, and parents during the 8th grade year of their looping experience. This case study will involve two different middle school groups (Team A and Team B) of students, teachers, and parents.

The first chapter of the dissertation begins with my personal perspective to assist the reader in understanding my subjectivity and biases, then proceeds with describing the background of the study, describes its significance, and presents an overview of the methodology used. Chapter one continues by noting the unique characteristics of the study, defines special terms used to organize the framework of this dissertation, and concludes with a preview of the proceeding chapters.

Personal Perspective

As a former teacher for ten years and working with middle school students as an administrator for the past thirteen years, I have personally experienced the dynamics necessary for teachers and students to build positive relationships in the school setting. I have learned that when students or adults are left out, ignored or unappreciated, a cycle of cynicism can result that is difficult to break, and often promotes a sense of hopelessness. Couple those negative feelings with changing family situations, peer pressure, and a lack of belonging, and students or adults can become emotionally unable to learn or to teach. All the more reason to invest in the time needed to develop positive relationships among students, teachers, and parents in the school setting.

In April of 1998, the relationships with every member of our school community was questioned and challenged as tragedy was experienced first-hand when an 8th grade student was shot by accident in a neighbor's home. This incident changed the complexion of our school community, prompting high profile security and scrutiny in the day-to-day operation of the school and in the organization of every activity or event held on campus. We survived the grief and loss of this particular student and several other loved ones in the following years through the vitality and strength of our relationships with one another – students, teachers, and parents. Through the grieving process we were able to support one another in ways that we were not able to support each other before. How we interact and the kinds of relationships we form have everything to do with what kind of culture emerges, has everything to do with the emergence of creativity, productivity, and innovation (Lewin, 2000, p.1).

The pedagogical practice of looping is based upon the development of long-term relationships in the school setting. My various roles as teacher, administrator, coach, and researcher shape my perceptions and feelings toward this practice in the middle

school setting. As a middle school principal, I began to explore, along with the teachers at my school, the issues and ideas of these multi-year relationships. I sensed from the enthusiasm exhibited by the teachers that most teachers truly enjoyed the students with who they worked with. But, I wondered if they would consider staying with adolescents over a period of two years or more?

What sparked my interest in doing this study was a point during the first year of looping at my middle school. I observed a real bond developing between students and teachers that was evident in both their formal and informal interactions. I wondered how we could learn more about the relationships that occur with looping at this level beyond just these observations. As an elementary school district, we were committed to this program. The benefits of looping were clear in the lower elementary grades, as a majority of parents and teachers chose to participate in the program. This district initiative had been successfully implemented at the elementary grades, (grades 1-5) as evidenced by the high number of staff looping with students and the waiting list for looping teacher's classrooms, but what potential would it hold for our own "community of learners" at the middle school? Would we experience success at the middle school with looping as our elementary counterparts?

Coupled with all of the other changes and transitions made at our middle school over the past six years (teaching in teams, changing classrooms to provide grade-level hallways, block scheduling, grade-level electives, and eliminating some honors classes), I was professionally challenged to suggest another change to our organizational structure. With all of the other changes that we had endured as we made the transition from traditional junior high to middle school, this district initiative seemed to be one of the most difficult challenges to contemplate as we thought about our way of work, teaching expertise, and our ability to maintain strong interpersonal relationships with our students and parents.

It was at this time that I personally decided to further explore and analyze the key factors associated with the concept of looping for my dissertation topic. Different ideas and themes began to emerge throughout my doctoral program that was relevant to me regarding the implementation of the looping concept and the writing of my dissertation. Some of those ideas were based upon qualitative study. I could relate to this process of inquiry as I thought about the conversations that I was having with teachers, students, and parents about the design of looping. As we discussed looping throughout the school year, storytelling became a means of understanding the benefits and challenges of the looping practice.

Other qualitative inquiry influences involve researcher Alan Peshkin (1992), who describes research as searching for the truth through multiple realities. I am most interested in the responses and behavior of the participants in the looping process, not whether the practice is right or wrong for adolescents. Harry F. Wolcott (1974), known for his ethnography, *The Elementary School Principal*, promotes the idea that all aspects of data are interrelated. Every observation, every statement, tone of voice, and the way words are put together tell a story about the looping culture. These ideas have inspired me to research in a more meaningful way on organize middle school programs in the looping context.

I was also inspired by Deborah Meier (1996), founder of Central Park East schools, and by her desire to create and establish small learning communities. Her writings have exemplified the importance of adult-child relationships in any school. The concept of multiyear arrangements was first implemented in 1974 by Meier because it enabled children and teachers to get to know one another well (Goldberg, 1991). She argues that schools can overcome their limitations of time by developing powerful relationships with the young people they work with. The foundation of looping is built

upon the desire of many teachers to work closely with their students in this extended time setting.

Progressive educator Linda Darling-Hammond in her book, *The Right to Learn*, (1997), reinforces the need for teachers to have more time to work with students. For teachers to come to know the minds and hearts of students well and for students to develop real expertise, teachers and students must have extended time together (p. 134). Looping practice promotes new instructional structures that give teachers more time with students and control over students' overall school experience which in turn provides more opportunities to be known and learn well. Darling-Hammond believes that for teachers to create schools that work, teachers must be prepared to collaborate more often and spend more time teaching. This can be accomplished in a looping environment.

Another influence on my thinking was Thomas Sergiovanni (1992), professor of education and author who advocates creating community and personal meaning in our schools. Sergiovanni contends that creating successful schools requires a commitment of heart and mind. To capture that desire, schools need to promote a sense of community in which all stakeholders in education are joined in a common purpose. Looping advocates the importance of these face-to-face communities who join together to meet the needs of their students.

An influential middle school educator who promotes student voice in learning is James Beane (1997). Because curriculum in many schools today is disconnected, fragmented, and incoherent, Beane contends that relating instruction to the lives of students and asking for their involvement creates more ownership and motivation to learn. Middle school teaching practices support this methodology. Students should have a voice in their learning. Students involved in looping classrooms will better develop their voice and be able to articulate their desire to learn and what interests

them. Through the development of long-term relationships these learning conversations can happen more often, especially in the second year of looping. James Beane is author of several monographs, books, and journal articles on middle school education. His themes of giving students choices in their learning through the inquiry process parallel with looping practice.

In conclusion, through the sharing of my qualitative inquiry, I will illuminate, describe, and analyze the relationships developed through this middle school looping process. Through the responses of middle school students, teachers, and parents engaged in the looping process I have learned what they perceive to be benefits of this practice including the conflicts, issues or contradictions that have been experienced in this context of learning.

Background and Context of the Study

Assumptions

One of the distinctive features of looping focus is the development of long-term relationships between classroom teachers, students, and parents. As a former middle school teacher, coach, principal and now superintendent, I firmly believe that personal relationships are the essence of any successful school. I have learned there can be a spiritual connection, a bond, which promotes an acceptable level of tolerance that is exhibited when people of a school community consciously work in concert. Personal relationships are the fertile soil from which all advancement in real life grows. (Stein, 1992).

It is my estimation based upon my personal educational experiences, the average U.S. student meets at least 50 different teachers by the time he or she graduates high school. A student in a K-8 school could have up to 15 different teachers and up to 35 different teachers in high school. This number would increase if a student

attended a middle school with more curricular offerings. I had approximately 50 different teachers from kindergarten through high school. I fondly remember the teachers that I had for at least two "looping" elementary grades as being people for whom I really worked and from whom I was challenged to learn. I had developed a positive personal relationship with those looping teachers.

Looping provides an extended opportunity for teachers to develop in depth relationships with both their students and parents. It has been my experience in various educational roles that positive relationships between students and teachers can play a vital key in the development of the whole child in the educational setting. I have personally been engaged in teaching situations where personal relationships over a period of time have created extended learning opportunities. With the challenges of standardized testing, school safety, and limited funding for schools, I strongly believe that feelings of belonging and a sense of community are necessary ingredients that contribute to one's overall success in school. Looping classrooms contribute to students' reaching their fullest potential due to the continued focus on both the intellectual and socio-emotional needs of adolescents.

With increased incidents of school violence, overcrowded conditions, and changing family situations, developing long-term relationships with students and their families seems to be a critical success factor in educating our students. These factors in addition to changing demographics and the high-paced infusion of technology have literally forced the affective needs of students to be addressed as educational priorities, especially at the middle school level where transitional issues are predominant. Through this study, I have learned more about these long-term relationships and how they relate to the looping concept in the middle school context.

In addition to this, there has been a movement across the country to personalize our schools through the development of long-term teacher-student relationships. In the

book, *Making Big Schools Feel Small*, (George and Lounsbury, 2000) the authors present the case for smallness through the development of long-term relationships, multiage instruction, and schools-within-a-school concepts. As previously mentioned, Deborah Meier (1996), a former inner city principal from Central Park East Schools has written several articles and books about creating small communities. She believes that smallness is a prerequisite for the climate and culture needed to develop the whole child both in heart and in mind. These educators take a position that supports smallness is needed to enhance student's self-worth and academic achievement. Looping provides the opportunity over time for a group of teachers to work with the same group of students to create these small communities of learners. Today we are a society awash in networks, yet starved for community (Katz, 2000).

Conceptual Framework – Middle School

Middle school philosophy sets the conceptual context for this study. Looping is an organizational pattern that promotes middle school philosophy through the development and establishment of long-term teacher-student relationships. A middle school is based upon the unique academic and social needs of young adolescents, organized by interdisciplinary teams, with flexible organizational structures that utilize a variety of teaching and learning approaches (NMSA, 1995). The concept of looping is a flexible instructional design that allows extended time with students to better address adolescents' academic and socio-emotional needs as long-term relationships are developed and maintained. Furthermore, the essence of middle level education is about serving the unique needs of adolescents 10-14 years of age, building upon the self-contained elementary experiences and leading them toward the departmentalized high school. Practitioners of looping indicate that transition issues are diminished, as the teacher need not start from scratch every fall, learning new sets of names, personalities,

and learning needs. Teachers can accumulate more in-depth knowledge of learning styles, including strengths and weaknesses (Gustad, 1998).

One of the essential elements of a middle school is an advisory program. This unique program is designed to address the social and emotional needs of middle school students. It is utilized in a variety of ways in middle schools across the country. Some middle schools have designed a separate class for which the team of teachers develops a curriculum based upon the needs of the students. Other schools integrate these advisory themes across their content as they teach their students throughout the year. Regardless of which approach is used, advisory promotes close relationships with students, a more personalized approach to teaching and learning where students learn to know they have an advocate in the school. Looping can promotes advocacy for students by developing and sustaining in-depth relationships with their teachers.

There is a rich history of the middle school movement that also supports the pedagogical design of looping by highlighting the need to develop long-term teacher-student relationships. Today, the unique developmental characteristics of adolescents are the driving force behind the push to create responsive schools, which is the foundation of middle level education. However, this restructuring of schools did not evolve without much debate and failure, which is reflective of most of the reforms that took place since the implementation of American public schools. A more detailed discussion of the evolution of middle schools will be addressed in the literature review when I discuss the historical perspective of looping and its relevance to present practices.

What are the developments in middle school education that make this case study worth exploring? Looping has traditionally been an elementary school practice since public education began in the late 1800's. However, as school enrollments increased, schools consolidated, and bigger facilities were needed to house students, one-room

schoolhouses progressed to grade level classrooms and looping diminished. Looping patterns began to emerge again in the late 1980's primarily at the elementary level. In *Lessons of a Century* (2000), a book written about the historical issues, forces, and changes that shaped American education, the authors indicate that "if the lessons of history reveal themselves in recurring patterns, education of the 20th century provides a textbook of *déjà vu.*" (p.1). The practice of looping made a comeback as other educational trends have in the past and gained attention again at the elementary level in the 1980's. While the number of middle schools has greatly increased over the past decades, many practices within these schools are not unique to this level. The practice of looping however, has been utilized to better meet the educational needs of students in an effort to bridge the gap between the elementary program and the secondary level.

What has stimulated this particular looping study is the fact that looping at the middle school level is limited. To date the studies that I have researched thus far include: 1) Paul S. George, University of Florida conducted a descriptive case study at a middle school in Gainesville, Florida (1987); 2) Attleboro School District in Massachusetts implemented a K-8 looping program (Hanson, 1995); 3) Tolland Middle School in Connecticut where teachers initiated looping practices (Lincoln, 1999); 4) Project F.A.S.T conducted in East Cleveland, Ohio (Hampton, Mumford, and Bond, 1997); and 5) The Delta Project, a longitudinal study of a North Georgia middle school, looping with 6th, 7th, and 8th graders (Pate, Mizelle, Hart, Jordan and Matthews, 1993).

Furthermore, according to George and Bloomsbury (2000), research on looping at the middle school level is limited and fairly recent. However, while limited in scope, past studies of looping suggest that teachers can accumulate in-depth knowledge of students' personalities, learning styles, strengths and weaknesses by spending several years with a class (Gaustad, 1998). Statistics collected by the National Middle School Association (NMSA) in 1996 indicate that less than 70 middle schools across the country

implement this organizational practice. A total of 63 schools were identified as participating in long-term teacher-student relationships and were surveyed to describe the perceptions of this practice (George and Lounsbury, 2000).

Hence, I hope to make a unique contribution to middle level education by illuminating the responses and emergent themes of looping as viewed through a middle school community. It is my hope that other studies may be stimulated from this research to further enhance the study of looping and determine it's relevance to the development of adolescents at the middle school level.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to determine: 1) How do relationships develop and sustain when middle school students and teachers stay together for more than one year? 2) To what extent do these looping relationships impact the context of learning? 3) What are the responses of students, teachers, and parents to the looping experience in this middle school? 4) What consistent themes emerge regarding the experience of looping in this particular middle school? and 5) What relevance does looping have to the advocacy of middle school philosophy?

The looping teams involved in this case study are 7th and 8th graders in a small urban, (but growing) community. Two interdisciplinary teams of teachers (Team A and Team B) are presently looping with their students from 7th grade to the 8th grade. This study is conducted with an emphasis on the second year of looping with the 8th grade classes. Team A finished year two of looping with its 8th grade students in school year 2000-2001. Team B is in its 8th grade-looping program this school year 2001-2002. Data for the research study was collected during the 2000-2001 school year for Team A and during the 2001-2002 school year for Team B.

Overview of the Methodology

The qualitative data collection was based upon the responses of students, teachers, and parents through the methods of: 1) in-depth interviews, 2) open and close ended questioning through surveys, 3) video-taping of looping classrooms, and 4) review of other artifacts collected throughout the study. Artifacts include items such as journals, letters from students, teachers, or parents, and field notes collected throughout this process. In the process of collecting research, I immersed myself in the lives of the looping participants to learn more about their behavior, language, and interactions. The research process enabled me to better understand looping from their perspectives, uncover emergent themes, and analyze data about the looping practice at this particular middle school.

The in-depth interview method was the dominant strategy for data collection through individual and focus group interviews. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to gather descriptive data in the participant's own words. I wanted to learn more on how the participants think and how they had developed the perspectives that they hold. The *emic* insight defined as "understanding the phenomenon of interest from the insider's perspective" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) is the approach that I am most interested in. I will describe as much as possible about the looping environment, the participant's interactions, and the relevance all of this has to responsive middle school education in the data chapter.

In-depth interviews were conducted with six students from each team (total of 12) with a demographic cross-section that represents different levels of achievement, socio-economics, gender and ethnicity. The teachers selected students with varying achievement levels and socio-economic backgrounds. They selected three boys and three girls varying in ethnicity of Caucasian and Hispanic. (This school population was

not very culturally diverse). The teachers from each looping team (A and B) recommended six students based upon these criteria for a total of 12 student interviews.

At least two focus team interviews were conducted with the teams of teachers during the 8th grade year of looping – one interview was held during the early part of the second year and another interview towards the end of the looping experience.

Six in-depth parent interviews from each team were arranged towards the end of their students' looping experience to compliment the study. Parents are an integral aspect of this looping partnership and it was interesting to gain insights from their perspectives on the education of their middle school student. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow for on-going reflection and interpretation of the data.

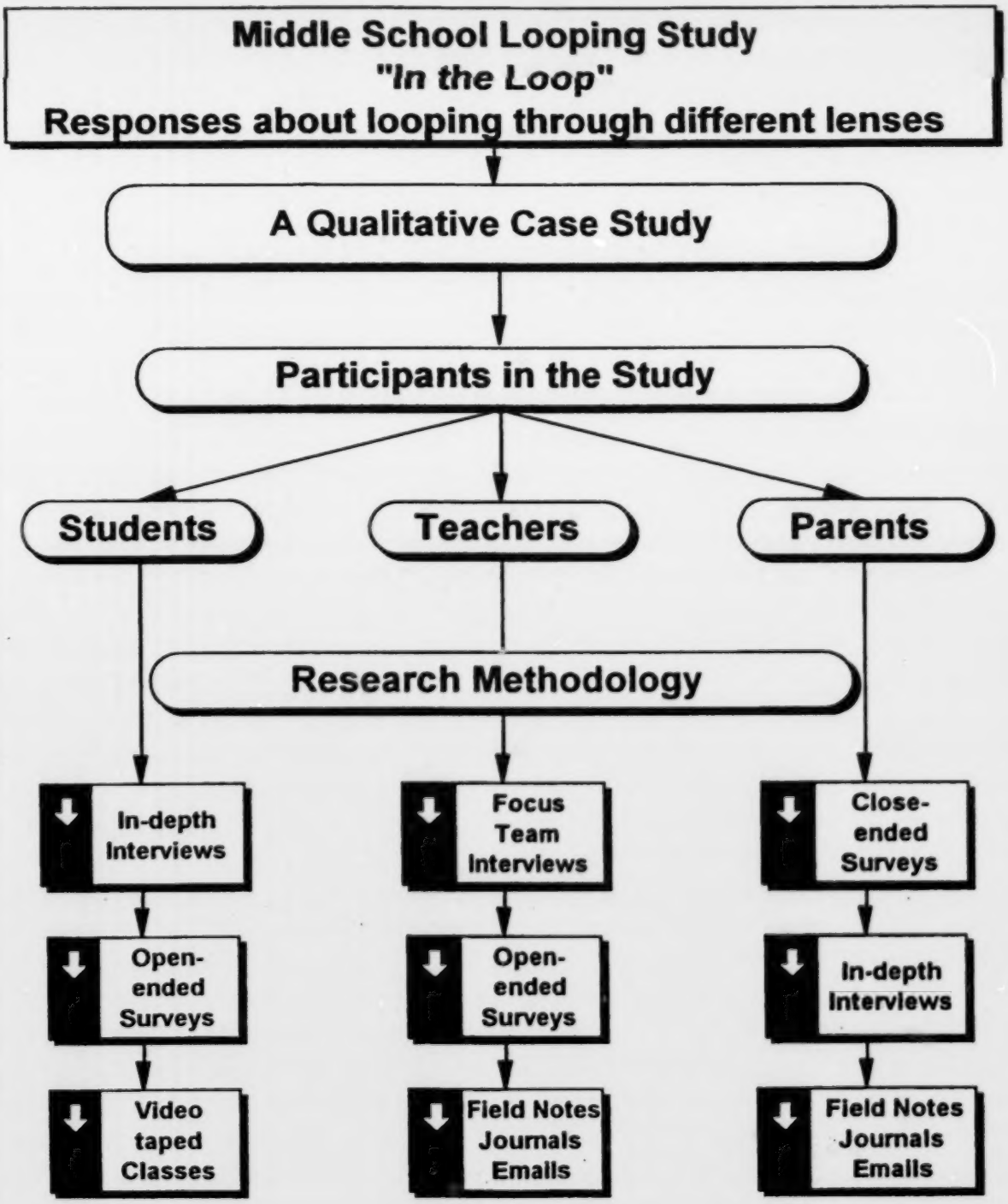
Open-ended surveys of 8th grade students and close-ended surveys of parents near the end of their looping experience were also conducted. The motivation behind the surveys was to better understand the 8th grade adolescents and parent's experience of looping in their own words. I gained a better social understanding of their thoughts and feelings in regard to looping. Collectively, this analysis helped me to better develop this portrait of looping using their voices. Cynthia Mee, author of 2000 Voices, conducted a study using voices of middle school students to better understand young adolescent culture. Open-ended survey questions were distributed to students to gather a variety of information about their perspectives on school and about life in general (Mee, 1997). I utilized this method to gain insight from the students and parents towards the end of their looping experience. I wanted to find out more about their perceptions of looping and record their perspectives in their own words. I aspired to better understand how the relationships between the students and teachers evolved through the looping process and what impact those relationships had on how the adolescents and parents viewed their experience in the middle school setting.

Videotaping of looping classes was also conducted during the second year of looping as well. Four to six sessions as selected by the looping teacher was arranged. I was able to learn more about the looping environment in its own context -the classroom. I also believe that looping is best understood in its own naturalistic setting as human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs (Bodgen and Biklen, 1998). Videotaping provided yet another opportunity for a rich description of the looping environment since I was able to record actual classroom practice and interactions. This method allowed me to review and repeat actual footage of the videotapes to gain a deeper understanding of the actual life in the looping classroom. The video equipment was set-up as a stationary recorder of events in the looping classroom. This approach was unobtrusive and allowed for more flexibility of observation. The looping teacher selected the lessons that were videotaped including the first days of the school year. One teacher from each team volunteered for the videotaping sessions, which occurred during the 8th grade year.

With the change in my administrative position to another school district, the process of participant-observation was somewhat challenged as my presence in the school (a visitor) created some disruption. I was no longer an integral part of the social setting on a daily basis. In my former role as principal, it was more natural for me to interact with students, teachers, and parents as a part of the school community. My daily behavior as principal resulted in many interactions through out the school setting whether in the hallway, classroom, or cafeteria. Ideally, participant-observation continues throughout the data collection process as access is gained and relationships are developed. However, in this study, I was more of an observer than actual participant. I had access to the looping environment for interviews, surveys, and videotaping. However, these events were planned ahead of time and arranged, which may have diminished the opportunity for some unexpected findings and interactions.

In conclusion, according to Spradley (1979), qualitative inquiry means learning from people rather than studying people. From this approach of the participant-observation continuum, I asked myself the following questions: 1) What was going on here? 2) Am I seeing what I hoped to see? 3) What am I not seeing? and 4) What does this all mean? Through my research and fieldwork in the looping environment, I was able to create a portrait of looping by incorporating the views, ideas, and stories of the looping participants.

Table 1 – Research Overview of Middle School Looping Case Study



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Unique Characteristics of the Study

This study involves two different teams of looping teachers, students, and parents in an 800-student middle school. Each team was comprised of approximately 125 students with four to five interdisciplinary teachers. Team A had completed one complete cycle of looping prior to this study while most of the teachers from Team B were beginning their first looping cycle as a team.

This case study included one middle school setting. The scope of the research took place over two school years focusing on the second year of looping with students, teachers, and parents in the 8th grade year with two different groups. According to professor John W. Creswell (1998, p. 61), "a case study is an exploration of a bounded system over time through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context." It was my intent to create a looping story as composed by students, teachers, and parents engaged in the looping process. I incorporated responses from all of the participants not only to provide several perspectives but to focus on the process of looping through the development of these relationships. The looping story emerged through various methods of data collection and interpretation of that data from all of the participants. The data collection drew upon the participants involved in this qualitative inquiry through various sources of information such as interviews, observations, and other related artifacts. Additionally, since there is limited research in this area, I believe that this study will contribute to the overall understanding of looping practice and illuminate ideas and practices that other educators can possibly implement and learn from.

Finally, as the former middle school principal and previous supervisor of the looping teams, there was a significant "power" relationship that my title and role bring to this study. While recent changes in administration has reduced this power relationship,

as I am now a superintendent in a neighboring district, there were past interactions and experiences with the participants that do not allow this power issue to go unrecognized.

Definitions of Key Terms

Since many terms in education have multiple meanings in different contexts, it is important to review the key terms that will be utilized in this research study. All terms will be defined in the context of middle school education and as those terms relate to qualitative research in the educational setting. These are my definitions:

Looping: An instructional design or organizational pattern where students and teachers stay together for more than one year in an academic setting. For this study, looping refers to team of teachers looping from 7th to 8th grade.

Middle School: A school which houses adolescents 10-14 years of age and designed to meet the development needs of this age group. Essential elements of middle school include: interdisciplinary teaming, advisory, block scheduling, and exploratory classes. There are many opportunities for students to be successful in academic and personal life. The middle school in this study houses 6-8th grades with appropriate transitional programs in place to address the needs of the students.

Teaming: A group of teachers who instruct different content areas who meet daily to provide for the educational needs of their students. The duties of being on a team include

developing interdisciplinary units, advisory activities, field trips, consistent and developmentally appropriate team rules for academic and behavior standards. Teams of teachers in this study have been working together for at least two years and have completed one previous cycle of looping with 7th and 8th grade students.

Advisory: A unique class or program that identifies the personal needs of the students that each team of teacher is working with. Each child in the school has an adult advocate. Lessons and activities are planned to instill personal growth as well as academic challenges. There is a focus on advocacy for each student, so that every student has an advocate in the school. The looping teams in this study regularly conduct advisory activities in a class called "Prime Time."

Block Scheduling: A scheduling practice that allows each team of teachers to teach only their students in a specified time during the academic day. This allows for teams to "flex" their schedule and make decisions based upon instructional needs of the students and the lessons for the day without impacting other classes or teams.

Exploratory Classes: These classes provide other academic experiences to develop and nurture the talents of middle school students.

Classes may include: art, humanities, writing, journalism, computer assisted drafting, computers, poetry, multi-media, foreign language, choir, band, or physical education. The middle school in this research study has many choices for students in this curricular area.

Qualitative Inquiry: A descriptive and interpretative research approach that acknowledges that everything observed is unique, important and may have meaning. It is a process where the all elements of your observations or research collected may have a relationship to the meaning of your topic. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, how people make sense of their world (Merriam, 1998, p.6). Questions can evolve from the data collected that create perspectives about what you are studying. I hope to describe the relationships developed during looping and the instructional process experienced through the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents.

Case Study: A qualitative inquiry employed to gain an in-depth understanding of a situation or process through holistic descriptions and analyses of a system or in this case two middle school looping teams. This process entails various methods of data collection. It is my goal as researcher to

develop a rich description of the looping process as depicted by the participants in this study.

Preview

This dissertation describes, analyzes, and illuminates the looping process from my personal lens. Through this qualitative inquiry, I have learned about the overarching themes or the *embracing gestalt* that gave my looping narrative story focus and meaning (Lawrence–Lightfoot and Hoffman-Davis,1997, p.29). By using narrative to tell this particular looping story, I have constructed a looping story that provides resonance and understanding of this practice through the interpretation of perspectives from the participants in this study.

Chapter Two provides the knowledge base for this looping study through the review of the literature. A review of the research on looping follows including the historical perspective, the benefits as well as limitations of looping, including middle school looping studies to date. The context of this study revolves around middle school philosophy. A discussion will take place describing the evolution of middle school education and the relevance of looping practice to middle school philosophy. Chapter Three is a description of the methodology for this study. Chapter Three begins with a brief review of qualitative inquiry including reasons why I choose the case study approach. I continue by describing the participants in the study, the research setting, methods for collecting data, and how this information will be analyzed. Chapter Four focuses on the collection of the data and the findings from this inquiry based upon the participant's points of view namely the students, teachers, and parents. Chapter Five provides the opportunity for the interpretation of the research. Questions I have answered from my analysis of the research include: What story of looping was portrayed from this study? Did looping influence the development of long-term relationships

between members of this school community? How did my personal experience and point of view influence my interpretation of the data? This study is important to me because what happens to students and teachers as they personally experience learning together and how they challenge themselves to learn is the essence of education. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a reflection of the emergent themes of looping including future implications and opportunities for looping at the middle school level.

Chapter Two
Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to examine the principle findings of the educational research and to provide a historical perspective of the links between looping practice and the development of public education. Practice, like knowledge, evolves. I believe it is essential to acknowledge the past and its impact on the present. Additionally, through this discussion, I define the rationale of looping and review the potential benefits including the challenges of looping. This review concludes with current research on looping and what has been learned thus far from this systemic grouping of students.

Historical Perspective of Education and Relevance to Looping

Certain aspects of the 20th Century educational landscape in America are worth reflecting upon because the events reveal the roots of long-standing looping practices in American public schools, since the development of the common schools in the mid 1800's. This discussion provides a brief overview of those educational events which I believe influenced the underpinnings of middle level education and rekindled the concept of looping. Diane Ravitch (2000), a historian of education and educational policy analyst, has this to say in her latest book, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms,* about the importance of reflecting upon our past.

> History helps us understand these issues. We cannot understand where we are and where we are heading without knowing where we have been. We live now with decisions and policies that were made long ago. Before we attempt to reform present practices, we must try to learn why those decisions were made and to understand the consequences of past policies. If we are to have a chance

of reclaiming our schools as centers of learning, we must understand how they came to be the way they are (p.14).

Looping practice dates back to the one room schoolhouse, where one teacher worked with students from one grade level to the next, usually teaching in a multi-aged setting. I believe looping was implemented as a necessity rather than by design due to the configuration of schools at that time. According to author, Joel Spring (1990) in his book, *The American School: 1642-1900*, "There is no evidence that teachers looped in any systemic fashion or for any pedagogical reasons prior to the 1980's, although there is little doubt that individual teachers at individual schools, either because of pragmatic or philosophical reasons, have practiced looping" (p. 180).

It is interesting to point out that in the mid-1800's, charity schools were precursors to American common schools. Charity schools were established due to a concern for the high number of unemployed youth in the cities and their involvement in gang activity. Charity schools were basically for poor city students (Kaestle, 1973). Private organizations, such as the New York Free School society, organized these schools to provide an inexpensive means in which to educate these children. English developer, Joseph Lancaster, implemented his "Lancasterian" method in charity schools because it was efficient and an inexpensive means in which to educate these students. The Lancasterian method accommodated large numbers of students (as many as 1,000) in seated rows who received instructions from monitors via a school master situated at the head of the room (Simel, 1998). This process of schooling also included character development and instilled virtues of submission, orderliness, and readiness to attention needed to prepare youth for the world of work. By imparting knowledge and moral development the Lancasterian system was used in attempts to create an ideal family structure within this institutional setting (Spring, 1994).

In the late 1800's, increased industrialization, population shifts, immigration, and expansion of voting rights led to the development of common schools. Schools were created to teach a common curriculum that would support the tenets of patriotism and democracy. A free and public education was advocated by Horace Mann, who is also referred to as the "father of the common school" (Cremin, 1988). Mann, the secretary of the Massachusetts board of education, advocated and helped pass the first ever compulsory-attendance law for elementary children, "Never will wisdom preside in the halls of legislation and its profound utterances be recorded on the pages of the statute book, until Common Schools shall create a more farseeing intelligent and a purer mortality than has ever existed among communities of men" (Editorial Projects in Education, 2000, p. 14). Mann supported several reforms: standardized curriculum, graded schools, better prepared teaching staff, and a longer school year, to name a few.

Throughout the history of American education there has been an on going debate about the quality of schools. In 1892, while educators were debating how education should be afforded to all classes of people and how long a common school education should be offered, the National Education Association (NEA) created one of the first commissions to study education. The Committee of Ten was comprised of William Toney Harris, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, Harvard University President, Charles W. Eliot, four other college presidents, three high school professors, and a college professor. This all male team of ten educators contended that all students should receive an academically rich education only differentiated by which foreign languages were learned. Another goal of the commission was to acknowledge that schools did not exist primarily as training grounds for students to attend college. A liberal arts education was endorsed that would provide intellectual development of the mind and a curriculum of rich content (Ravitch, 2000). In other words, all students should be treated alike even though only a small percentage would go on to college.

This liberal education would prepare students for the "duties of life" whether they went on to college or after high school graduation or even if a student dropped out of high school without graduating (NEA Report, 1892).

One significant reform promoted by the Committee of Ten that exists in many schools today is the strategy of active or engaged learning as compared to rote memorization of isolated facts and miscellaneous information. The Committee also advocated that if students are to use their minds well in learning, students should pursue that knowledge through being actively engaged in the learning context.

Today, it is interesting to reflect upon the Committee's idea of a common curriculum as we experience the advocacy for standards of learning in all content areas, as well as a thrust for a national curriculum, including a national certification for teachers. There are many critics of this "one size fits all" theory prevalent in our schools of today, as almost every state in America is redesigning curriculum to align with state and national standards.

In the late 1800's, as school populations increased, and school organization was bureaucratized, education reformists were searching for ways to establish classrooms as communities of learners, also referred to as the Progressive Era. The progressive movement prompted educators to look at learning, child development, and curriculum with a new perspective. "A system of education should be one that embraces every part of the community," argued, educator Noah Webster. Webster also supported a common curriculum that would bring a unified approach to the fast changing society (Cremin, 1988). Nationalism, patriotism, and democracy were themes woven in Webster's work as he left as a legacy a standardized American dictionary, an American version of the *Bible*, and a famous spelling book (Spring, 1994). Progressive education according to Superintendent Carleton Washburne (1952) is simply the on-going application of the findings of science to help children grow up with this ideal of

democracy – the fullest possible development of a person's capacities, both as an individual and as a responsible participant in a democratic society.

Progressives believed that America would be a better society as they strove to create schools that would challenge students yet promote democratic principles. This movement offered educators a more "child-centered" approach instead of holding all students accountable to one standard of development. Progressive education has been associated with more active learning, cooperative planning with both teachers and students, recognizing social emotional needs as well as cognitive needs and attempts to relate learning to "real life." It is very important to note that the philosophy of middle school education, which began to emerge sixty years later, was a very similar student-centered approach.

Francis Parker, who first came to prominence in the late 1800's, is often referred to as the "father of progressive education" as he advocated building schools around the interests of children. This child-centered approach underscores middle school philosophy and looping practices. His program was called the "Quincy System" which utilized non-traditional sources for instruction such as magazines, newspapers, and materials developed by the teachers. Learning by doing was stressed as well as expression of self through the arts. The word method was utilized in lieu of phonics to avoid the drill and practice required to teach children sounds of letters. The Francis Parker Day School advocated that children should be the center of the educational process using an integrated approach to learning. Again, it is interesting to note that these child-centered progressives wanted the schools to fit the nature of the learner, a "whole-child" approach. This ideology is similar to those utilized by middle school advocates for middle schools in the 1960's, and relevant to the rationale for implementation of looping practices at the middle school level over the past twenty years.

The study of children flourished in the late 1800's, leading the way for changes in American schools. One of the leading advocates in the United States included a developmentalist, G. Stanley Hall, the President of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, believed that school was to support children as they move through developmental milestones. The curriculum should be based upon the creative nature of the children rather than shaped and controlled. Learning through experience was promoted in his book *Adolescence* (1904), as well as individualization in the education of children. His research also supported German enthusiast Friedrich Froebel's work (the creator of kindergarten) and the natural development of the child. Froebel emphasized the teacher as "facilitator" rather than authoritarian and he believed that children learned through play (Cremin, 1988).

One of the most famous voices of the progressive movement was John Dewey (1916) who explained, "Democratic education is deeply social – it enables a person to live as a social member so that what he gets from living with others balances with what he contributes. What he gets and gives as a human being, a being with desires, emotions, ideas, is not external possessions, but a widening and deepening of conscious life – a more intense, disciplined, and expanding realization of meaning" (p. 360). Dewey established the University of Chicago – Laboratory Schools to promote experiential learning during this progressive movement. He believed that the essence of schooling was the "fullness of heart." "It is absurd to suppose that a child gets more intellectual or metal discipline when he goes at a matter unwillingly that when he goes it out of the fullness of his heart" (Dewey, 1916, p. 360). It would seem that looping practices would be a natural fit during these times to create these "community of learner" classrooms and the "fullness of heart" that Dewey so strongly believed in.

While the progressives believed in child-centered schools, another reformist group believed that there were social implications for schooling beyond the individual

students. Social "reconstructionists" came into prominence during the Great Depression when a more militant role for schools was encouraged. Some members of this group urged social indoctrination in schools to promote class warfare as the only way to improve society. Many Americans did not support this notion because they felt schools could not promote a social revolution (Hutchins, 1953).

The third group that I believe has influenced looping practices in our educational system today is the "administrative" progressives. They promoted more frequent use of standardized tests, separate curriculum for college bound students as compared to vocational students and grouping students by ability. It was their belief that education would be equalized through an individualized curriculum according to one's abilities. This group influenced the development of the high school curriculum and much of their ideologies remain in our school systems today (Editorial Projects, 2000, p. 97). The instructional design of looping provides teachers with two or more years to develop this individualized curriculum, but without tracking by ability.

In 1918, twenty-five years after the Committee of Ten report, the National Education Association commissioned another publication to better the address the needs of high school students during this time. New goals for high school education appeared in a report titled, "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education" (Ravitch, 2000, p. 353). Differentiated curriculum should be provided to high school students depending on their career aspirations. According to the report, "the purpose of democracy is to organize society that each members may develop his personality primarily through activities designed for the well-being of his fellow members and of a society as a whole" (NEA, 1919). Social efficacy was the predominant theme of the time as a comprehensive high school curriculum would prepare students for living in the real-world.

Each group of every progressive cause from the 1890's through World War I had their special program for schools (Cremin, 1988). According to David Elkind (1988) a professor of child development, in his book, *Reinventing Childhood,* childhood and adolescence were at the forefront of educational priorities up until this time and this developmental phase was viewed to be more important than adulthood. It was the recognition that adolescent needs had been long-neglected that sparked the middle school movement several years later.

The end of World War 1, achievement and intelligence perfected testing to assist public schools with understanding student performance. The Army who had administered tests to assign large numbers of recruits to different duties during the war influenced these tests. As American schools were getting larger, this method of testing seemed efficient. Standard tests were created to measure student performance in every subject (Finney, 1923). These standardized tests are still prevalent in our schools today as states and the federal government mandate this preferred method of accountability. In a very short time, the testing market emerged, as Lewis Terman from Stanford University took the lead in bringing intelligence testing to public education using an intelligence quotient (IQ) as a predictor of future learning and placement in school programs. Homogenous grouping evolved from this testing practice as schools grouped students according to their ability instead of individualizing instruction. Terman was concerned about meeting the needs of gifted students and wanted to insure identification and proper placement in classes that would challenge their intelligence. (Terman,1923). While IQ testing took into account individual differences, it did not support the fundamental purpose of receiving a common education in the American school system. Basically, these tests determined which students would receive an academic curriculum and which would not. Middle school philosophy does not support student grouping by ability. Heterogeneous groupings refer to whole classes of students of varying abilities

learning together. This type of student grouping in middle schools allow for diversity and high expectations for all students, not just the gifted children. Looping provides teachers with at least two years in which to improve a students' achievement level and influence a child's intelligence, which may have more relevance to what type of adult the student may become as compared to a measurement on an IQ test.

During the 1930's, curriculum revisions became a priority for schools as the tug of war continued between child-centered advocacy and subject-centered education. Progressive leaders argued that schools should be based upon student interests not traditional programs of studies that had little relevance to real-life experiences. What children should know and be able to learn was heralded as a scientific approach, not to be entrusted to teachers (Ravitch, 2000). Curriculum specialists were utilized to train educators on how to best teach their students. This shift of power from local control to scientific experts lead the movement of curriculum makers to establish major activities of study and develop lists of specific abilities to justify a school's curriculum. Methods of teaching at the elementary level began to promote activity and projects while secondary schools focused on the integration of subject matter. High school teachers scoffed at the idea of working with others not specialized in their content area and did not recognize the instructional need. However, the methods of activity teaching and integrated learning are predominant methodologies utilized in middle school programs today and validate the need to organize instruction based upon the unique needs of students, just as educators from the past have done.

As we move into the 1940's, it is apparent through this brief historical review that some thought American schools were created to provide a unified culture out of a population of people with very diverse needs. Cycles of reform were perpetuated all throughout the history of American education. The tenets of public schooling were to promote the democratic principles of our country through the curriculum in the schools.

Advocates of the progressive movement insisted on creating schools that would stimulate and challenge students, but critics charged that these child-centered schools lacked academic rigor and high standards.

In the 1940's, due to the outbreak of World War II, new innovations were overshadowed as Americans focused their attention on national defense and the preservation of democracy. Along this theme, during 1940, President, Franklin D. Roosevelt hosted the fourth White House conference (held every 10 years) to focus on all American children. He charged conference participants to provide for all children to grow in citizenship that would preserve the ideals of democracy (Editorial Projects, 2000).

The GI Bill of Rights passed in 1944 to prevent unemployment of returning war veterans. This bill, which mostly benefited men, subsidized costs for a college education that nearly doubled the college population (Spring, 1994). Postsecondary education became more available for potential students instead of only for the upper class or well to do.

Continuing on through history, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's exemplified the need for equality in educational opportunity and access to schools in an effort to end segregation. Many special programs were created through court battles that ensured an equal education whether one was bilingual, migrant, poor, or disabled. These opportunities created better access to American schools yet there was still much concern about learning content. Progressive educators had been criticized for promoting "real life" education instead of one of academic rigor. Additionally, Ravitch (2000) reserves harsh criticism for the progressive movement as equal educational opportunity was the fundamental idea; however, access to a common curriculum she argues, was based upon social class leaving huge gaps in educational opportunity.

Most of the student-centered schools identified by leaders of the progressive movement were private and housed mostly white upper class students.

Then in the late 1950's the Russians launched Sputnik, which was viewed by many to be a public humiliation of the American education system. The Russians had achieved a technological edge that also prompted a national security crisis. This historical event influenced then President Dwight D. Eisenhower, to allocate new funding for defense and education (Divine, 1993). In his book, *Education and Freedom* (1959), Admiral Hyman Rickover promotes, "schools must now concentrate on the intellectual powers of each child and insure that each child achieve to their highest potential. All children were entitled to a good education regardless of social class." Rickover praised European systems of education and criticized progressive educators urging that Americans should be more concerned with the academics of schooling not the ills of society (Editorial Projects, 2000).

The Carnegie Corporation of New York, a philanthropic foundation created by businessman, Andrew Carnegie, greatly influenced the history of education through the infusion of millions of dollars into library programs, literacy studies, public television, and other commissioned studies that directly influenced education (Cremin, 1988).
Two of these studies resulted in books significant to this discussion. Former Harvard University President, James Conant published, *The American High School Today* (1959), and the landmark report that has influenced middle level education as we know it today, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1987). The *Turning Points* report will be explained in further detail in the section devoted to the middle school movement.

James Conant, who had previously served on several commissions, was invited by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to analyze the problems associated with the American High School. He wrote a book that praised large high schools for their

preparation of students through required course work and an elective program. He believed this type of academic offering allowed differentiated curriculum for the talented, as well as the majority of students who needed experiences other than academic courses. He also determined that small high schools could not offer the coursework needed for a differentiated curriculum and advocated that the 21,000 high schools across the United States at this time be reduced to 9,000 large comprehensive high schools to better serve all of the students. (Ravitch, 2000, p 363). This approach to education became a basic pattern for secondary education and became prevalent in junior high schools. The mission of junior high schools for the majority of those enrolled was to guide students to a future occupation. In contrast, the debate on how to best educate adolescents inspired the creation of the middle school movement.

The Evolution of Middle Schools

In the early 1900's, junior high schools were conceived to better meet the needs of students being educated in a K-12 setting and thereby reduce the high school drop out rate. Junior high schools were created to provide a distinctive education for middle grade students. This movement recognized that students in the middle grades had developmental transition needs and these schools were specifically intended to be responsive to those unique needs. Additionally, enthusiasts of junior high schools believed that common school education should consist of six years instead of eight years. This six -year education (K-5) would be followed by three years (6-8) to guide students into a future occupation. However, this trend was short-lived due to a lack of vision and a failure to make clear its intentions to both the educational professionals and the public (Briggs, 1920). In some instances, departmentalized junior high schools were created for logistical reasons such as to relieve overcrowding or to suit consolidation needs of communities. With many students dropping out of high school, the lack of

professional training for teachers, junior high schools became mini-blueprints of high school programs instead of the responsive schools designed for adolescents, as was the original intention. Again, there was the dilemma of what the purpose of schooling was to accomplish, and was it to promote learning or prepare students for the world of work?

The concept of middle level education began to emerge in 1960 as junior highs were viewed as training grounds for the high school program with little consideration of the intellectual, socio-emotional, and physical needs of students in the upper elementary grades. In 1963, William M. Alexander, often referred to as the "father of middle school education," called for a new school in the middle (Alexander, 1995). These new schools in the middle were to better balance the subject-oriented high school program with the whole child philosophy of the elementary programs through the teaming process of teachers. The junior high model had become so standardized since its inception that reformers sought to replace the junior high with a new emergent middle school version.

Middle school founders criticized the junior high model as a miniature high school that did not address the unique characteristics of adolescent learners. Middle schools evolved in response to the recognition that adolescents had unique characteristics and needs that could be better addressed in a teaming format. The teaming format creates smaller sections of students within large organizations working with a small group of teachers. Furthermore, middle schools should have a separate and unique delivery system of education based upon this adolescent transitional period. This belief has been the driving force that has prompted school districts to initiate middle level school programs including the instructional design of looping to better address the needs of their middle level students.

In 1966, Donald Eichhorn, a supervising principal in Pennsylvania wrote an influential book, *The Middle School*. He believed that the traditional junior high program

was not capable of meeting the needs of young adolescents advocated for schools to be organized differently.

> More and more professional literature is offering evidence that the junior high school concept has been seriously challenged. Through an altered school district organizational pattern – that of an elementary unit of grades kindergarten through five, a middle school grouping of grades six through eight, and a high school of grades nine to twelve, be initiated (p. 104).

According to Eichhorn, middle schools maximize academic growth through the efficiency of learning and the minimization of conditions that detract from learning. The learning process is not an isolated scientific endeavor, but one related to students and their development. He also developed the term "transescence" to describe the unique developmental characteristics of adolescents and the many transitions they experience (Eichhorn, 1977).

During the 1960's, societal influences continued to affect the process of education. Coupled with rising rates of drug and alcohol use among teenagers, as well as homicide deaths and out-of-wedlock births, schools experienced increasing struggles with maintaining student discipline and overall promoting respect for all who attended (Johnson, 1996). Schools reflected the individualistic spirit of society of the times (1960's) as student rights were advocated but not necessarily the value of responsibility. Some argue that lack of values, disrespect of morals, and laissez-faire policies contributed to the dramatic drop in standardized test scores, when scores actually bottomed out in the early 1980's. (Angus and Mirel, 1995). All the more reason for a new school in the middle as American schools began to take over the responsibility of teaching of family values and to refocus their responsibility to develop young minds.

Since the 1960's, junior high school organizational structures have begun to give way to the establishment of middle schools across the country. According to the NMSA,

a professional organization that emerged in 1970 to promote middle school education, middle schools have established six through eight grade schools, while the traditional 7-9 junior high school organization has declined. From 1970 to 1987 grades 6-8 increased 160%, 5-8 schools increased 47% and 7-8 schools increased 7% (Alexander and McEwin, 1988). In a 1993 survey of 12,100 total middle schools across the country, 55% were 6-8 schools; 22% 7-8 schools, 12% 7-9 schools, and 11% 5-8 schools; (McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins 1995). Additionally, states across America are increasingly recognizing that there is a distinction between teaching young adolescents and elementary school children, by requiring endorsements and certification for middle level teachers.

In 1982, NMSA, the only national professional association uniquely organized to promote middle level education, recognized the challenges of creating effective middle schools and produced a position paper, *This We Believe*. The NMSA promotes dedication to improving the educational experiences of young adolescents by providing vision, knowledge, and resources to all who serve them in order to develop healthy, productive, and ethical citizens. The importance of striving to achieve developmentally responsive middle level schools should not be overlooked as this was the premise for creating a different and unique school for young adults. The nature of the educational programs that young adolescents experience during this formative period of life, will in large measure, determine the future for all of us (NMSA, 1995, p.33). Unlike the past endeavors to create responsive schools, *This We Believe*, provided a vision and direction for middle level education.

> The middle school is an educational response to the needs and characteristics of youngsters during early adolescence and, as such, deals with the full range of intellectual and developmental needs. Young people going through this rapid growth and extensive maturation that occurs in early adolescence need an

> educational program that is distinctively different from either the elementary or the secondary school. Existing programs for this age group have all too often lacked focus on young adolescent characteristics and needs. Educators, school boards, parents and citizens generally need to become more cognizant of the age group and what an effective educational program for this group requires. No other age level is of more enduring importance because the determinants of one's behavior as an adult, self-concept, learning interests and skills, and values are largely formed in this period of life. The developmental diversity of this age group makes it especially difficult to organize an educational program that meets the needs of all. The academic needs of middle school students are affected greatly by their physical, social, and emotional needs, which also must be addressed directly in the school program (p. 10).

While the junior high movement of the early 1900's promoted a similar idea logy, there was not a clear vision on how to create responsive schools for adolescents. *This We Believe,* created a blue print of what the essential elements of a true middle school would advocate. The first position paper was released in 1982. The latest revision (NMSA, 1995) is based upon continued research, shared experiences of middle level practitioners, and the influence of societal changes on middle school education.

Developmentally responsive middle level schools are characterized by:

1. Educators committed to young adolescents - teachers are advocates for students, serve as role models and make a conscious choice to work in a middle school.
2. A shared vision of achievement - student-teacher relationships, and the community guide the educational process in a middle school.
3. High expectations for all – responsive schools promote high expectations for both students and adults in the school community.

4. An adult advocate for every student - adults serve as advisors to students to bridge the gap between home and school issues.
5. Family and community partnerships - to support learning at home and throughout the community. A middle school takes the initiative to provide many opportunities for parent and community involvement.
6. A positive school climate - learning is best accomplished in a safe, inviting, and caring environment. A student-centered approach is evident through collaboration of staff, involvement of parents, and open communication.

Therefore, developmentally responsive middle schools provide:

7. Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory - curriculum blends academic skills, real-life integration, school-service, and the opportunity to discover other areas of interest.
8. Varied teaching and learning approaches - methodologies of teaching are just as important as curriculum choices. Learning experiences capitalize on students' personal background, culture, active engagement, and variations on grouping students for learning.
9. Assessment and evaluation that promote learning - these opportunities provide continuous and authentic experiences, student growth, and student ownership in learning.
10. Flexible organizational structures - teams of teachers work together to plan and coordinate the educational program based upon the needs of their students.
11. Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety - a comprehensive health and fitness program, daily physical education, and home-school partnerships are implemented for students to achieve and maintain healthy minds and bodies.

12. Comprehensive guidance and support services - programs provide students and teachers with support to provide on-going assistance (NMSA, 1995, p. 10).

Coupled with the rekindled middle school movement in the early 1980's, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was preparing to release a powerful document, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) that redefined education. This document chastised schools for not keeping up with society and declared that our American economy would suffer if the educational system was not dramatically improved for all children. Both high standards and behavioral expectations were to be addressed before it was too late.

> All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools of developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. Individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, training essential to this era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom (p. 7).

Reform efforts are a recurring theme that weaves its way through the history of American education. As previously mentioned, in 1893, the Committee of Ten published one of the first reform reports that influenced American education. This reform effort prompted several commissions to be developed throughout the history of education that promoted various causes. Another reform effort, The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (1918) endorsed an organizational pattern of secondary education.

Reform efforts have also emerged from middle level educators. The urgency in continued educational reform at the middle level is evident by studies that document reasons for students dropping out of school (Wheelock and Dorman, 1988). The factors most cited in this report are: alienation, retention, lack of self-esteem, punitive practices, and fragmented school organization to name a few. All of these factors seem familiar as history repeated itself several decades later.

The preeminent reform document that transformed middle schools across the country was *Turning Points – Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989). The *Turning Points* report was created by a commissioned task force supported by the Carnegie Corporation's Council on Adolescent Development. As with past endeavors, the Carnegie Corporation again influenced society and educational practices through comprehensive study and research. Through commissioned research, interviews of experts in relevant fields, the task force examined promising new approaches to place the transitional needs of adolescents higher on the nation's agenda for educating this age group. "Young adolescents face significant turning points. For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future" (p. 6). The task force goes on to say, "A volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents. Caught in a vortex of changing demands, engagement of many youth in learning diminishes, and their rates of alienation, substance abuse, absenteeism, and dropping out of school begin to rise" (p. 8). This report provided a framework in which to design middle schools. Ironically, this council was not represented by any middle level educators or specialists (Jackson and Davis, 2000). This task force of political leaders, researchers, policy specialists and other lay

leaders called for a national consensus to make the transformation of middle schools a reality.

- Create small communities of learning – school should be a place where close, trusting relationships are formed to create a climate for students' personal and intellectual growth.
- Teach a core academic program- every student should learn to think critically through mastery of appropriate curriculum, lead a healthy life, behave ethically, and assume responsibilities to become a productive citizen.
- Ensure success for all students – all students should have the opportunity to succeed in every aspect of the program, regardless of previous achievement or the pace in which they learn.
- Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students – decisions concerning the experiences of students should be made by the adults who know them best, their team of teachers.
- Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents – teachers should be selected and specially educated to teach middle school students.
- Improve academic performance through fostering health and fitness – middle school students must be healthy in order to learn.
- Reengage families in the education of young adolescents – families must be allied through trust, respect, open communication if adolescents are to succeed in middle schools.

- Connect schools with communities – middle schools cannot do this alone, responsibility for each student's success should be shared by schools and community organizations (Carnegie Corporation, 1989).

The council believed that long-lasting reform would occur if middle level educators, especially teachers, embraced this vision. The Council emphasized that the success of the transformed middle grade school would stand or fall on the willingness of teachers and other staff to invest their efforts in young adolescent students.

Throughout the history of education there is an interesting paradox that exists. Reformists continued to strive for changes in the curriculum, the configuration of schools, and advocated for enhanced preparation of teachers, yet little importance was given to organizing relationships for learning. A child-centered approach was often a predominant theme for educating the majority of students. However, there was limited discussion on how to group students for this type of learning, especially as schools across the country experienced rapid growth and increased enrollments. Teachers have a tremendous impact on students' learning through the development of trusting relationships. *Turning Points* addressed the importance of these relationships and went on to promote that continuity of learning could be experienced through looping practices. To create a powerful teaching and learning community, teams of students and teachers should remain together for the entire middle school experience (Carnegie Corporation, 1989). The instructional design of looping provides the time needed for teachers to know their students and parents well in an effort to develop the necessary emotional attachments that are critical to motivation and effective learning. (Jackson and Davis, 2000).

Following the release of *Turning Points*, the Carnegie Corporation released an ambitious ten year program of grants to states and cities to promote the transformation of middle schools using the recommendations from their report. (Jackson and Davis,

2000). Thousands of schools across the country, including my former junior high school in Fairbanks, Alaska and in Illinois, used this document as a research base for school reform. This document provided a much-needed centerpiece for school vision teams to study, based upon research of powerful approaches to middle level education including the rationale for past structural changes to the traditional junior high organization. Many of the teachers at both of these traditional junior high schools had not been trained to work specifically with middle level students. We needed to move beyond the traditional practices of educating junior high students to enhance the efficacy of our new middle school classrooms. In both situations, school enrollments were rapidly rising with limited facilities in which to teach our increased student populations. The additional stress of displacement amongst students due to overcrowding prompted urgency in these school community conversations. This landmark report was a "call to action" to address the often neglected needs of adolescence in all aspects of their development – intellectual, socio-emotional, and physical development. This reformation of schools using the *Turning Points* recommendations could be attained to improve the life chances of youth from many backgrounds.

Almost a decade later, using the voices of teachers and principals of middle schools, a follow up report by Dr. Andrew Jackson, the principle author of *Turning Points*, worked with the Carnegie Corporation to assess the implementation of these recommendations through a national grant program called the Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative (MGSSPI). This competitive grant program initially provided funding to schools in 27 states through a series of two-year grants as well as other state initiatives that supported the eight *Turning Points* recommendations. This collaborative project began one year after the release of *Turning Points*, and was directed along with Dr. Gayle Davis.

After working with middle level educators over the past ten years, Jackson and Davis wrote the book, *Turning Points 2000, Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* to provide a research base that not only promotes all of the previous recommendations but practical application for educators, policymakers, parents, and community members to substantially improve teaching and learning in the middle school context. The overall goal of this new publication recognizes that student success is at the center of any school reform. All students regardless of social class or learning needs will be afforded opportunities for success in the middle grades. Seven "design elements" are recommended in this publication, which are interrelated and must be implemented as a system not in isolation. The *Turning Points 2000* design system is grounded in the beliefs of the previous report including best practices from middle level educators from across the country. The recommendations are as follows:

- Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based upon how students learn best.
- Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become life-long learners.
- Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.
- Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared education purpose.
- Govern democratically, through direct or representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best.

- Provide a safe and healthy environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.
- Involve parents and community members in supporting student learning and healthy development (Jackson and Davis, 2000, p. 25).

Turning Points 2000 challenges deeply rooted and structurally reinforced norms in American education. The advocacy of the adolescent is at the premier of educational reform including the teachers and community who all must work together to promote success for all middle school students. This report also supports the basic tenets as outlined in the 1995 book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform,* by David Tyack and Larry Cuban. Reformers need to focus on ways to help teachers improve instruction from the inside out instead of decreeing change by remote control, also keeping in mind the democratic purposes that guide public education (Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

To bring closure to this discussion, American public schools have continually been influenced by the historical events of society. The belief that education promotes personal and social progress stimulated the rise of the American public school system. All through out the history of education schools have mirrored society for better or for worse. It was interesting for me to learn that many of the ideological educational struggles and challenges of long ago are still present in our school systems today as educators continue their reform efforts in schools to reflect a changing and diverse society.

Furthermore, the work of the progressive educators opened the doors of change in many schools. Schools as we know them today have deep-rooted beliefs instilled from the educators of the progressive movement, especially middle schools. Not to oversimplify the past, but the influences of unprecedented industrial and urban growth transformed America from a nation of farms to an urban industrial empire, impacting

schools dramatically and forcing changes to take place systematically (Cremin, 1961). A new approach was needed to provide free public education to children living in crowded urban areas. This brief historical perspective is relevant as it portrays the pattern of educational change and the impact that different philosophies have had over a period of time. Each reform group advocated for a better democratic education based upon the needs of children. This leads into our discussion of the emergence of looping in the United States and how the first looping classrooms from European countries influenced this practice in America.

The Organizational Pattern of Looping

Looping in the United States is not a new concept yet it has been difficult to trace its origin. The United States Department of Education in 1913 considered looping in a memo by raising this question, "Shall teachers in graded city schools be advanced from grade to grade with their pupils through a series of two, three, four, or more years, so that they may come to know the children they teach and be able to work in the latter years on that of the earlier years?" (Grant, Richardson, and Forsten, 2000). Grouping of students with teachers for two or more years has been more of an elementary school practice in the United States than a middle school practice (Grant, 1998). Despite enthusiastic practitioners, the experience of European school systems, and favorable research, looping is still uncommon in the United States and considered innovative (Burke, 1996). Countries such as Italy, Germany, China, and Japan have influenced American educators to establish long-term relationships with their students as looping is more of a common practice in those countries, especially in the primary years. (Wynne, 1994).

The practice of looping has been prevalent in European countries for the past 100 years (Barnes, 1980). Several European countries have been practicing looping for

many years. Italian preschools, considered by some the best in the world, utilize a three-year loop (Palestis, 1994).

The northern Italian town, Reggio Emilia, established the first public preschools. Classrooms are organized for looping where the same group of children and teachers are kept together for three-year cycles. The first cycle begins from infancy until their third birthday at which time they move into preschool classrooms for another three years from age three to five years of age (New, 1990). In addition to creating a stable and nurturing environment for children, the three-year grouping provides continuity and familiarity that enables more effective parent and teacher relationships. Parents are urged to stay in the classroom for the first couple of weeks of school. This allows parents to develop a network of families for future socialization. The Reggio Emilia program supports a commitment to long-term home/school relationships through the instructional design of looping.

More common in Europe, looping has been successfully implemented for years in Germany by headmistress Anne Ratzki of the Koln-Holweide School, who believes that looping creates a sense of community.

> We don't lose several weeks each September learning a new set of names, teaching the basic rules to a new set of students and figuring out exactly what they learned the previous year. Most important teachers get to know how each student learns....the importance of this is incalculable (Ratzki, 1988).

The Koln-Holweide is a comprehensive secondary school committed to democratic school governance and teaching methods. The school contains grades 5-10 and an upper school of grades 11-13 for college-bound students. The students are grouped with the same teachers for six years. Each team contains six to eight teachers who plan and coordinate the instructional program. The German teachers (unlike American teachers) are trained to teach two subjects and team members devise their

schedule to determine who will teach what classes. The Koln-Holweide teachers believe that a close, stable relationship is a necessary condition for effective education (Oxley, 1994). The development of German comprehensive schools was mainly due to economics. Germany found in the 1960's, as the United States did in the 1980's, that schools needed reform. The traditional method of schooling was not producing well-educated individuals to promote the economy. These comprehensive schools were created to help elementary students reach high levels of academic achievement. At this time approximately 15% of all public schools in Germany are comprehensive schools. Some German schools have also implemented multi-year teacher student groupings for as long as six years and have found that extended time spent building relationships assists students in making the necessary brain connections that learning requires (Zahorik and Dichanz, 1994).

Another European school system of particular note that implemented looping from first grade to grade eight is the Waldorf education system, which originated in Stuttgart by the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory owner, Emil Molt, for the children of his factory workers. Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian educator and philosopher living in Germany founded the Waldorf schools in 1919, under the condition that the school would be a unified 12-year school open to all children, regardless of political affiliation or poverty level. Steiner believed that long-term relationships were beneficial to students and that the educational responsibility should always be in the hands of the teaching staff. The looping program maintains one teacher and the same group of students from the first grade through grade eight. Waldorf schools are designed to educate the whole child – head, heart, and hands. Waldorf elementary teachers use a kinesthetic approach to learning, which involves the child first in the realm of impulse and doing, then emotion, then gradually leading them to learning skills (Ogletree, 1975). Art is not an isolated subject and is integrated across the curriculum. The "main lesson" is a special feature of

the Waldorf Schools. This is a period of study, which takes place at the beginning of everyday for about two hours. Textbooks are not utilized in this school. The students write and illustrate in color their own materials, which take the place of textbooks. Additionally, all students learn two foreign languages by immersion orally. The most significant feature is the long-term relationship developed with the student and the teacher for their entire school career. Today, there are over 500 schools in 32 countries that work with the Waldorf principles and teaching methods. There are over 130 schools in Germany, 260 in other European countries, 120 in the United States and Canada, and 17 in Australia (Barnes, 1991).

In some schools in China, the bonding of students to other students and students to teachers is enhanced through the structure of the school. Students are divided into three groups: first through sixth grades, seventh through ninth grades, and tenth through twelfth grades (Liu, 1997). The students remain in the same class every year with the same teacher. Jing-Qiu Liu, an assistant professor at Troy State University, taught in the People's Republic of China for 10 years. From her first-hand experiences she advocates for multi-year relationships. Not only does this opportunity help students form lasting relationships, she contends that this arrangement also provides teachers with a greater degree of autonomy. While Chinese teachers may have 50 students in a class, they teach only three or four classes a day. Each student also is assigned to a homeroom, similar to advisory arrangements in middle schools. The homeroom teacher plays many roles, but first and foremost the homeroom teacher is an advocate for each of their students. In this arrangement, the school becomes a home away from home where every student is known well. The importance of relationships between teachers and students is critical to the students' academic and psychological growth (Jones and Jones 1995).

In Japanese middle schools, looping is prevalent as is teacher collaboration and team teaching. The academic curriculum is determined by the Ministry of Japan, which includes requirements for music, art, and moral education. While American schools focus on individualism with the concept of equal educational opportunity, Japan provides each student with the same contents to learn, equal financial support, and equal physical facilities (Whitman, 1999). In Japan, teachers and educational researchers are appointed to national curriculum committees that invariably make decisions on what should be taught in the schools. These appointed groups also write the textbooks. Due to this increased ownership there is a more direct connection between research results and changes in curriculum. The Ministry acting as the leader of the curriculum team by law makes final decisions (Whitman, 1999).

The organization of primary and secondary grades in Japan is (6-3-3) six primary grades, three middle grades, and three high school grades. Japanese students also attend school on Saturdays and beginning in 1993 the fourth Saturday was made a holiday to enhance family life. Looping is a common middle grades practice in Japan as a group of students remain with the same teacher for 7^{th}-9^{th} grades. Japanese teachers who keep students for more than two years indicate that the first year is for getting to know the students and the second year is for teaching (Wynne and Walberg, 1994).

One of the distinctive features of looping focuses upon the development of long term relationships between a classroom teacher and their students. A German principal/teacher explains, "Most importantly, teachers and students get to know each other – teachers get to know how each student learns, and students know which teachers they can go to for various kinds of help. The importance of this is incalculable" (Ratzki, 1988). Looping provides a "gift of time," to develop and nurture each student's intellectual, social, and emotional growth through the development of long-term relationships.

Looping Research at the Middle School Level

Research on the subject of looping at the middle school level is limited. Looping in America has traditionally been an elementary school practice. Dr. Paul S. George (1996) of the University of Florida identified only 70 middle schools across the United States using some form of looping. His most recent case study work dominates the field of study in regard to middle school looping. In a recent article written by Dr. George and Kathy Shewey, also from University of Florida, (1997), they noted that teachers, parents, and students support the "looping" arrangement and conclude that the practice holds promise for future study, especially when implemented in the middle school setting. Surveys were sent to identified schools engaged in some form of looping and 35 schools from 14 states responded - 33 schools utilized multiage grouping, 17 schools employed looping, and 5 schools had a combination of the two methods. They raised the question, "What happens when teams of middle school teachers and students stay together for more than one year? One theme that emerged from educators' comments reveals that effective interpersonal relationships were paramount to the success of long-term teacher-student relationships. Classroom management was more effective due to the continuity that the looping situation provided. Teachers also felt that they were better advocates for students and it enhanced their role as an advisor. They understood and became more aware of students' personal lives in and out of school. Academically, continuous progress was more keenly observed and teachers believed that they were more persistent in working with their students, even if in conflict. While test scores were not a part of this study, teachers believed that they were able to help students achieve higher standards. Assignments and instruction were better tied to academic achievement. Parent-teacher relationships improved and were reported to have significant effects on communication and involvement. And finally, looping provided the

opportunity for teachers to work collaboratively and helped to promote mutual trust and respect.

While most of the results of this study were positive, there were concerns expressed about personality conflicts between teachers and students. Some teachers believed if there were a conflict, a looping arrangement made no difference to the student and actually made the situation worse.

Students surveyed in this study were positive about looping, but not as positive as their teachers. Seventy-one percent agreed that they like staying with their teachers for more than one year as compared to the strongly positive response of 90% by the teachers.

Parent comments were modestly positive when their student stayed with the same team of teachers for more than one year. A majority (64%) of the parents believed that staying with the same team of teachers had helped their student to be more successful and that they preferred this type of arrangement for their other children. Parents were divided on whether this arrangement encouraged parent involvement. A concern that some parents voiced was having a poor teacher on the team and having to deal with that situation for more than one year.

Conclusions from the study revealed that all three groups agreed that they experienced a greater sense of community and that relationships benefited from working and learning in school together. In some cases, from the teacher perspective, having a relationship with the students improved diagnostic and instructional planning.

The Delta Project (Hampton, Mumford, and Bond, 1997), a three-year longitudinal study was conducted in a small community in rural Georgia. This project was designed by teachers in collaboration with university researchers to make the middle grade years a positive experience for all students. An interdisciplinary team of four teachers began their looping experience with their students in 1990 with the

understanding that they would remain together for the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade years. The relationships between classroom structures and student motivation were studied for two years. The teachers' intent was to maintain or improve achievement, improve higher order thinking skills, improve problem-solving skills, improve self-concept/self-esteem, and students' attitudes and motivation. Through interdisciplinary instruction, cooperative learning, student collaboration on assignments and projects, they hoped to create this community of learners.

The findings of the Delta study reveal that the team of teachers presented students with a variety of learning activities. The students perceived these learning activities to be challenging, relevant, and interesting. Students liked the variety of individual and group projects the teachers assigned. Students appreciated how they got to learn from one another. Some students indicated that this method of learning was really fun. The data also indicated that cooperation and interaction among students increased over the two-year period. Self-esteem was more positive and significant in the second year of the study as were peer relations.

A generalization of the Delta study is that students' self-esteem and attitudes towards school improved during the two years of the study. One of the most important findings is that motivation was significantly impacted due to the teachers and students staying together for more than one year. Students repeatedly indicated that they liked this arrangement. They understood the expectations of the teachers and felt it helped them build more self-confidence and self-esteem. From the student interviews, the students felt that the teachers understood and cared for them. This study promotes the ownership of teachers working together to plan a learning environment that they all believed in and were willing to work hard for.

A third study worth mentioning is the K-12 Attleboro School System in Massachusetts serving 6,000 students. During the late 1980's, a pilot program was

implemented where all classroom teachers would loop with students for two years in first grade through sixth grade. The pilot was so successful that the middle school grades of 7th and 8th grade were added to the looping program. Continuity and familiarity were themes that emerged from surveys given to the teachers in the program. Parents reported that students were less apprehensive when beginning the new school year, especially that second year. Summer learning was promoted as teachers furnished students with packets of ideas for summer reading, writing, and other areas of exploration (Hanson, 1995). Teachers provided recommendations for future loops in the areas of: class dynamics; on-going teacher input; and de-emphasis of job performance based on standardized test scores.

Research from the Attleboro, Massachusetts School District, with looping programs in grades one through eight, found the following results from a seven year empirical study:

- Student attendance in grades 2 through 8 increased from 92% to 97%;
- Retention rates decreased by more than 43% in those same grades;
- Discipline and suspensions, especially at the middle school level, significantly declined;
- Special education referrals decreased by more than 55%; and
- Staff attendance improved from an average of seven days absent to fewer than three days absent per year (Grant, 1996).

Another teacher directed inquiry led to looping at Tolland Middle School in Connecticut. A 7th grade team of teachers wanted to remain with their students as they progressed to the 8th grade. The faculty at Tolland studied the looping concept, visited other schools, and ventured into a looping pilot during the 1996-1997 school year. The

Board of Education received an evaluation conducted at the end of the first year, which included many positive results, especially in the area of discipline, attendance, reduced academic failures, and more parental support. This particular group of teachers attended workshops on looping and sent out questionnaires to fifteen other schools that had initiated looping programs. Tolland Middle School Principal Robert Lincoln believes, "providing stability in our young people's lives may be as critical in the middle school years as it is at any time during a student's career. Given today's less than traditional family situations, a looping model is a way to provide stability in the often unstable lives of adolescents" (Lincoln, 1997). The staff and administration at Tolland believe that working together in a looping arrangement allows for long, lasting trusting relationships to form, increased academic time, and fewer classroom management problems.

In her the book, *The Right to Learn*, Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) emphasizes just when teachers begin to know their students reasonably well, they pass them on to someone at the next grade level who must start all over again trying to figure out how they best learn. She further explains that educators should promote restructured schools as places where teachers and students are deliberately grouped for learning in different patterns.

> For teachers to come to know the minds and hearts of students well and for students to develop real expertise, teachers and students must have extended time together. Teachers have the opportunity to achieve greater rewards by doing well with students and continually learning from each other. Incentives for students are the opportunities to be cared for and to be competent life-long learners. New structures give teachers much greater time with students and control over students' overall school experience which in turn gives students a greater likelihood for success. Students also have much greater opportunity to be known and to learn well (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.151).

Extended time together means that teachers will get to know their students well by working with them for more than one year. Another example of this type of arrangement where teachers were assigned to work with students for three years is Project FAST (Families are Students and Teachers). Out of the need to better service urban elementary students, the East Cleveland Schools established a partnership with Cleveland State University and The Cleveland Foundation to pilot a program called Project FAST. Students entering kindergarten stay with the same teacher through the end of second grade for a three-year loop. Traditional schooling methods had proved ineffective for this African-American community where 69% of the students were from single-parent homes, and 49% of the families were below the poverty line. (Hampton, Mumford, and Bond, 1997). This program also included summer enrichment and year-round interactions with their teachers, which may very well hold promise for looping practice under similar conditions.

Project FAST components were: multi-year assignment, effective teachers, parent involvement, summer enrichment, and a planning and implementation team to provide a support system. The effects of Project FAST on student achievement were very significant. Students scored substantially higher on standardized tests in the areas of mathematics and reading and attendance improved. Parents reported feeling more respected by teachers, having more confidence in their children's teachers and administrators (Hampton, Mumford, and Bond 1997).

A recent action research project conducted with first and second graders from a middle-class community in Eastern Iowa also revealed positive looping results. Looping student test scores were higher than non-looping students. Parents, teachers, and students comments indicated that looping was beneficial to the school community (Krogman and Van Sant, 2000). The goal for implementing looping in the elementary

setting was to enhance parent, student, and teacher relationships to maximize learning time.

Various school districts throughout the United States are experimenting with looping. Jim Grant, of the Society for Developmental Education and the National Alliance of Multiage Educators, and author of *The Looping Handbook* (1996), identifies and shares examples of those schools which include districts in: Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Florida, and New York. Upon further review of recent periodicals, I learned that schools in Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio are also engaged in developing long-term relationships with teams of teachers and students (Grant, 2000; Jacobsen, 1997; Lincoln, 1997; McCackin and Blackwell, 1997).

A study initiated by Fort Wayne, Indiana Superintendent, Thomas Fowler-Finn, identified the organizational pattern of looping as an innovative practice to ensure students achieve at all levels. In the spring of 1997, researchers at Indiana University-Purdue University and the school staff from the Fort Wayne Community School engaged in this research project. The study is divided into two phases. The first phase has revealed teacher attitudes towards looping through in-depth interviews and the second phase yielded data on student achievement from a longitudinal study (Simel, 1998). Findings from the first phase reveal that:

1) Teachers did not necessarily initiate the looping program but had expressed a commitment to remain with their students for a second year. Many teachers were reassigned to the next grade so looping became an assignment.

2) Teachers believed that looping provided them with more instructional time, especially at the beginning of the second year. Both students and teachers were ready to jump into learning that second year.

Teachers had more ownership of student progress and believed that their students had more positive attitudes towards learning.

3) Teacher/parent relationships were improved and parents were more involved which teachers believed led to student achievement. A few teachers reported negative interactions with parents but confirmed they were more ready to work things out with parents since they would have to work with parents for at least two years.

4) The practice of looping is demanding. Teachers must continually look for new ways to teach and motivate students. Looping coupled with other site-based building reforms was viewed as an extra burden by the looping teachers as they felt they were working at their capacity.

5) The biggest advantage is the family atmosphere of the classroom. The sense of family was a big difference from other classes teachers had taught.

6) Looping is critical for students who receive less support from home as compared to other students. The looping environment provides stability for these children whose home lives are uncertain or dysfunctional.

While all of these aspects revealed in this study could enhance an instructional environment whether in a looping classroom or not, the teachers in this study report a much greater degree of these themes occurring in their looping classrooms.

Looping has caught on in Naples, Florida as Manatee Education Center (K-8) provides a looping environment for grades one through eight as a means to build strong relationships. Past NMSA President, Santo Pinto, indicates, "looping practice has created smallness out of bigness" (Jacobson, 1997). Pinto organized this diverse school population around the concept of looping to strengthen teacher-student ties because

70% of his students were members of minority groups and more than 70% qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program. Additionally, almost half of the students were from migrant farming families who often times do not return to school until the harvest season is over around the month of November. Developing a sense of community through the instructional design of looping became a priority for this school district based upon the unique needs of the students.

Benefits of Looping - Student-Teacher-Parent

The beneficial aspects of looping are noted among members of the school community – students, teachers, and parents.

Student Benefits

We can argue that all members of a school community benefit from the organizational structure of looping. One of the most important benefits is the additional learning time that occurs at the beginning of year two of the loop. "We begin the year teaching, not just reviewing, since we had the students the previous year and know what was taught," explains Patricia Crosby, a looping teacher of 7th and 8th graders (Crosby, 1998, p. 46). Productivity is enhanced when a framework of "personalization" is in place. Jan Jubert, a first grade teacher from Wisconsin, provides the following list of looping benefits in her parent handbook (Grant, Johnson and Richardson, 1996 p. 37):

- sense of stability
- reduced apprehension
- strong interpersonal relationships
- sense of community
- trusting and honest relationships
- strong bonding because of high comfort level
- tailored curriculum to foster higher academic and social expectations

- curriculum that builds upon previous experience and prior knowledge
- a greater opportunity to compare and contrast learning and learned concepts
- an interactive community of independent learners

According to student surveys collected in the Paul George study (1996), the advantages from a student's perspective include: knowing what to expect from the teachers, being familiar with the teacher's style of teaching, locating classes, knowing the teacher's limits, understanding a teacher's personality, your teacher knows your academic strengths, and you become attached to your teachers.

In June 1999, another student survey analyzed from a pilot study in an Illinois middle school in Lake county found that 83% of the 8th grade students felt closer to their teachers as compared to the previous year, 80% of the 8th grade students believed it was easier to talk with their teachers after the second year of looping, and those 8th grade students felt that having the same teachers for two years was a benefit.

There are both academic and social benefits afforded to students in a looping situation. In addition to the items previously mentioned, there is opportunity to continue learning throughout the summer months with assignments and projects given to encourage life-long learning. According to Jim Grant (2000), also the Alliance Director of Multiage Educators, instructional time is utilized differently during the first year of looping which allows more time for academic instruction instead of putting closure on class experiences. Many looping teachers utilize the traditional summer vacation months as key opportunities for extended learning activities. Project FAST incorporated this idea of summer enrichment as did Tolland Middle School, as teachers prepared activities and projects for students to complete during the summer months. Students know they have to be accountable since they have to report and share their projects the following school year. Also, the developmentally delayed student may have more opportunity to learn

basic skills without the need for retention due to looping arrangements because of the extended time with the classroom teacher (Burke, 1996).

Social benefits include opportunities for students to develop self-confidence, especially students with learning disabilities or students who are shy or reserved. By providing more time to establish positive peer relationships, there is an enhanced sense of belonging to a school community. Deborah Meier, supports the adult-child relationships by establishing small learning communities in her 1995 book, *The Power of Their Ideas,*

> Small learning communities are structures for caring. This requires seeing children over time. It means passing them in the hall before and after we have taught them, knowing their other teachers well, seeing them in different settings and guises and this developing a broader repertoire of ways to approach them. This close knowledge helps us to demand more of them; we can be tougher without being insensitive or humiliating. It also means we know their moods and styles, who to touch in a comforting way and who to offer distance and space in times of stress. It means that every adult in the school feels responsible for every kid, and has insights that shared can open up a seemingly intractable situation to new possibilities. Knowing ones' students matters, including and perhaps, especially those who are hardest to know (Meier, 1995, p. 111).

Teacher Benefits

One of the distinctive features of looping focuses upon the development of long-term relationships between classroom teachers and their students. Looping is the opportunity for students and teachers to stay together for two or more years to share in individual growth and development. Jim Grant, advocate of looping, reflects upon these relationships as compared to our real-life experiences, "The magic of looping is to

establish long-term relationships between students and teachers. In our society, we establish those relationships with our doctors, our dentists, but not with our teachers, which makes absolutely no sense" (Grant, 1996). According to John Lounsbury (1991), middle school enthusiast and professor of education the essence of middle school education is its philosophy of teaching and learning.

> The locus of our major efforts in middle school education should be on the student-teacher relationship, for that is the only place in education where there is a pay-off. When students and teachers stay together longer with broadened responsibilities, the artificial separation of life and its problems into "subjects" is less likely to occur (p. 60).

In general, teachers indicate that most of the benefits come in the second year of looping. They know the students and their needs, building on academic concepts previously taught, the stability of having a caring adult in their life at school, continuity, and job satisfaction-from being able to see the students make so much progress, and a reinforced sense of belonging, to a family in a "community of learners." Due to extended work schedules of parents and today's less than traditional family situations, students need to establish positive relationships with the adults in their school life. By looping with a teacher who knows the students well and whom they trust, students are provided with more academic time which allows them to succeed (Rasmussen, 1998). The first year is spent developing a trusting, caring relationship with students and teachers. "It was the greatest joy - to see it all come together - to get to see it all click." writes Alice James, Manatee Florida Teacher (Grant, 1996).

Looping offers the security and stability of a long-term relationship, which reduces transitional challenges and raises the self-esteem of students. Teachers become significant others in students' lives, giving them a sense of security (Vann, 1997). This instructional design has been found to increase job satisfaction among

teachers and allows teachers to "hit the ground running." Attendance is enhanced as discipline problems are reduced (Grant, 1996). In the middle school context looping can reinforce the need for developmentally appropriate practices in terms of meeting diverse transitional needs, as well as the academic and affective needs of students through teaming practices, interdisciplinary instruction, and advisory activities. Teachers who have a through knowledge of a students intellectual capacity and ability are better able to engage students in higher order thinking situations because they deliberately use that information in planning their instruction (Williams and Wood, 1997).

Looping can also be a confidence builder when teachers work cooperatively as a team. "Planning sessions are that much easier when each team member is confident that she or he knows what to expect from a teaching partner when there is agreed upon team expectations," indicates, teacher Patricia Crosby (1998). A looping environment creates numerous opportunities for teachers and students to develop, maintain, and nurture trust. Trust is important to young adolescents; they are always searching for the truth. Middle school students want to trust themselves, their decisions, friends, teachers, and their families. The better teachers know their students, the better they can "reach and teach" them.

Looping has been shown to provide a more personalized approach to teaching and learning, allowing teachers to lay the foundation in the first year. This, in turn allows more extended learning opportunities into the succeeding year and the extension of critical thinking skills. With all of the emphasis on school safety and security, Ronald D. Stephens, (1999) director of the National School Safety Center states, "Despite all of the fancy hardware, the single most effective violence-prevention strategy is the physical presence of a caring adult."

Looping may provide the opportunity for positive relationships to develop, but does not necessarily cause them to happen. Personality conflicts are a major concern

when students and teachers cannot find ways in which to connect on an interpersonal level. Teachers must understand the potential benefit of looping over the long term and be willing to work with their students in this two-year arrangement. However, if other remedies have been tried and the personality conflict continues, there must be another option for educating that particular student.

Parent Benefits

Parents and teachers are positively affected by good parent-school partnerships. There is increasing evidence that the quality of the links between parents and schools influences adolescents' school success (Eccles and Harold, 1993). Parental involvement especially in a middle school plays a key role in the success and achievement of young adolescents (NMSA, 2000). As previously mentioned, the Carnegie Report, *Turning Points*, (1989), indicates families must be engaged in the education of young adolescents. However, by the time a student reaches middle school, there is a diminished relationship between schools and home which is all the more reason to establish long-term relationships with parents and students in a looping classroom.

Looping allows parents to be more involved in the educational process as they have opportunities to develop trusting relationships with teachers over a two-year period. Parents are more apt to communicate with the looping teachers since they know them well. The benefits include: increased academic performance as teachers are able to diagnose students' skills and plan instruction accordingly; parents and teachers become closer as school becomes a shared experience, a family experience; relations improve as trust is developed; and a sense of community is enhanced (Stevenson, 1992).

At the end of the school year in June of 1999, a parent wrote a letter to his child's looping teacher, "I am filled with emotion as my student completes the 5th grade. We,

as a family, have enjoyed your class during the last two years. I am appreciative that you have managed to keep my student's interest and she has enjoyed going to school and learning with you. In days when parenting is getting tougher and outside influences getting worse, I am grateful for your leadership and example as a parent and as a teacher."

Challenges and Limitations of Looping

While the review of literature reveals many positive benefits of looping, there are challenges and limitations associated with looping as well.

From the teacher's perspective, a transient school community may disrupt the educational process, as planning and coordinated lessons based upon last year's curriculum will not be familiar to the new students who are added to the looping team. New students placed on the looping team during the second year may find it difficult to adjust and break into the already established relationships amongst the team of teachers and students. This is where the looping teachers and students need to be aware of this awkward transition for new students and provide activities that promote inclusion of all students in this transition process.

There is also the concern of exposure to diversity of teaching styles. Some students and parents believe that they are best served by having new teachers and different ways to learn each school year. Attleboro teacher Greg Killough supports looping at the elementary level, but believes that middle school students need diversity and exposure to different teaching styles. According to Killough, middle school students need variety to counteract their tendency to form cliques (Grant, 1996). Along this line of thinking, teachers in the Fort Wayne Indiana Community School District believe that familiarity is a drawback for children older than fourth grade and support diversity for older students and not the continuity that elementary looping may provide (Simel 1998).

Administrators involved with looping programs must recognize that personality conflicts can be amplified through the looping practice if the teacher and student are unable to develop a personal relationship. Consistent expectations may provide a neutralizing effect for difficult students especially in the second year of looping. However, if students are disruptive they may erode the sense of community that looping teachers try to create and maintain through the development of trusting relationships. While often times a difficult student is in need of stability and continuity that looping offers, the looping team of teachers should not feel required to keep this student for two years or more. This also holds true for difficult parents. These types of parents should not have to be endured for more than one year (Simel, 1998). Finally if student-teacher personality conflicts exist and continue, teacher judgment and objectivity (when dealing with a conflictual child) may be an impossible challenge for the looping participants to overcome.

Teachers involved in looping need additional in-service time to prepare for a two-year curriculum as well as the opportunity to learn from other looping professionals. Additionally, teachers' practical experiences show that more academic content is covered and they are better at adapting to students' individual learning styles (Elkind, 1987). Looping teachers should review all academic information about students who they may be spending two years with in this instructional design (Black, 2000).

Too many special needs students on one team may dramatically change the dynamics of teaming and learning. If teachers are spending all of their time making modifications for special needs students, they are unable to sustain continued progress with their other students. Looping teachers may delay special education referrals knowing that they will have time to perhaps fix the problems. A two-year delay for a referral could have long lasting detriments to the special needs student.

Administrators should post information on job vacancies for looping teacher positions and the expectations involved. Staff should be involved in the interview process for looping colleagues so as to have a vested interest in this organizational grouping of students and a ownership to this instructional design. Another consideration in the hiring process to consider is that beginning teachers should not be involved in looping until they have mastered teaching the district's curriculum and are familiar with state standards for teaching.

From a parent perspective, parents who believe that a teacher on a looping team is marginal or an ineffective instructor will not tolerate an extended year arrangement. There should be an option as a last resort for parents not to be involved in looping if they have strong reservations about teaching staff (NAESP, 1996). Parent-student choice should be an essential element in the design of the looping program. Students, teachers, or parents should not be mandated to loop. Successful programs have been implemented due to voluntary teacher initiative. The school community should have full knowledge of this instructional design and the reasons to promote the practice in the school district. On-going communication should occur with a new program especially in the first year as well as continued assessment.

At the end of a two-year loop, some teachers and students may experience great emotional difficulty when leaving the looping class. Eighth graders may have a difficult time in the transition to the high school program as they encounter a host of new teachers with different expectations. So, the transition out of the middle school is just as important as the transition coming into the middle school program.

In conclusion, in the following chapters, I illuminate through various perspectives how looping relationships were developed in this middle school community as well as the key factors of the looping process. The research from my qualitative study provides additional support to the review of the literature as well as revealed other challenges and

benefits of looping practice. I believe that my study holds great promise for enriching middle-school looping research. Finally, I believe this looping research will stimulate other studies of this instructional design.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter explains my qualitative inquiry about the practice of looping in a middle school and the methods used in conducting the research, giving special emphasis to analysis of data. The type of qualitative research employed was a case study approach focusing on two different 8th grade groups of middle school students, their team of teachers, and their parents in their second year of looping.

Since I believe that most of the benefits of looping occur during the second year, my efforts were concentrated on collecting data during that timeframe. Data collection took place during the 8th grade school year from two different teams of students, teachers, and parents. Team A began their second year looping cycle with 8th grade students during the 2000-2001 school year. Team B is presently looping with their students in 8th grade during the 2001-2002 school year. I am able to conduct this research at the school because the students, teachers, and parents have volunteered to participate in this study and the district school board has approved my research project and given me permission to collect data for this case study.

The research methods utilized in this study were as follows: 1) in-depth interviews of students, teachers, and parents engaged in looping, 2) open and close ended surveys of students and teachers towards the end of their looping experience, 3) observation through video-taping of looping classrooms, and 4) document analysis of field notes or other artifacts collected from participants throughout this study. Each data collection process and the instruments used will be described in further detail later in this chapter. In essence, I will explore how students, teachers, and parents viewed looping experiences and developed relationships in this particular middle school including what insights, thoughts, and attitudes emerged from their experiences in looping.

A Qualitative Perspective Using the Case Study Approach

My goal with this research study was to better understand the meaning of looping practice through the perspectives and responses of the participants. I chose qualitative inquiry as I am most interested in the *emic* perspective. According to Schwandt (1997), "the *emic* definition originated in linguistics (phon*emic* v. phon*etic*) a distinction once popular in cognitive anthropology. Emic refers to the insider's perspective – the language, concepts or ways of expression used by members in a particular group or setting. Etic refers to the outsider's perspective (researcher) to describe the culture." Case study researcher, Sharan Merriam in *Qualitative Research and Case Study Application in Education* (1998) describes the emic perspective as understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspective, not the researcher's. As Patton (1995) explains in his conference address to the American Educational Research Association,

> Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting - what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting (p.1).

Hence, I wanted to portray many images and perspectives of looping at the middle school level. I will present complex thoughts and ideas about looping experience to create this view of looping in my middle school. In the data chapter, I will illuminate the looping phenomenon through the study of relationships among the participants.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), prominent educational sociologist, eloquently describes illumination.

> Portraits are constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships. All the processes of portraiture require that we build productive relationships and benign relationships. It is through relationships between the portraitist and the actors that access is sought and given, connections made, contracts of reciprocity and responsibility developed, trust built, intimacy negotiated, data collected, and knowledge constructed.

Therefore, I have learned through this qualitative inquiry, the "lived" meaning of the participant's experiences of their actual world and the understanding of their emic perspective.

Questions relevant to learning about the meaning and value of the looping experience in this case study were: 1) How did relationships develop and sustain when middle school students and teachers stay together for more than one year? 2) To what extent did these looping relationships impact the context of learning? 3) What were the responses of students, teachers, and parents to the looping experience in this middle school? 4) What consistent themes emerged regarding the experience of looping in this particular middle school? and 5) What relevance does looping have to the advocacy of middle school philosophy? These questions framed my work as I began to construct answers, responses, and personal perceptions. Norman Denzin (1994), indicates that these types of questions are the art of interpretation. "Nothing speaks for itself. Confronted with a mountain of impressions, documents, and field notes, the qualitative researcher faces the difficult and challenging task of making sense of what has been learned" (p. 179).

My examination of looping at the middle school level reveals images and perspectives that helped to develop a portrait of the experience through description,

analysis, and interpretation. Qualitative research is the on-going process of constructing meaning through interactions with people and their environment. In my opinion, looping is about teachers developing relationships over time with their students and parents in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of their students' academic strengths, challenges, and personal aspirations. Qualitative research sets the stage for discovery through investigation and reflection. According to Merriam (1998), the essential characteristics of qualitative research are as follows:

1) the goal of eliciting understanding and meaning
2) the researcher as primary instrument of data collection and analysis
3) the use of fieldwork
4) an inductive orientation to analysis
5) findings that are richly descriptive.

Therefore, my qualitative study elicits the voices and feelings from the participants as well as myself while seeking to better understand looping practice at this particular middle school. I sensed that looping provides a learning environment that parallels that of a close knit family and thrives on maintaining successful individual and group learning, positive social development, as well as develops an independence in learning and personal growth. As principle researcher for this study, I was immersed in the design of instruments for this study, the data collection as well as the interpretation of the data. The collection of data in the second year of looping assisted me to formulate themes and patterns of behavior of both myself as researcher, and the participants involved in the research project.

Case Study Approach. I chose a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of looping at the middle school level and the meaning of that experience in terms of developing relationships for all those involved. What defines this type of research is the group studied or social unit, which, for this study, is the looping

participants at the middle school level. "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam,1998). Thus, gaining access, developing relationships, and gaining trust was a critical success factor in my efforts to collect the data for this looping study. I have worked to recreate and develop the diverse perspectives of looping experiences that describe the dispositions and relationships of those involved (Creswell, 1998).

Voices of the Participants. Another essential element to the looping study was to represent the "voices" of the participants (students, staff, and parents) involved in the research. In the next chapter, I share the voices that I heard. What connections will there be between events at school and the perceptions of the participant's experiences? How do I understand their perspectives by their contextual absence or their presence? I have produced a narrative story that has many voices, not just my own.

As an educator, I was very interested in learning from the students' voices. Middle school students are often misunderstood by adults. Because adults were young once they often believe they know what young adolescents are thinking or what is best for them. Through the research, I created a forum for the student voices which allows adolescents to use their own words to describe the social realities of their real world. I learned more about how they view their world of school and their own learning. Through interviews, observations, and surveys I collected information that will helped me to better understand their beliefs and values. "Voice comes from a deeper place than our throats. Voice comes from our heart, from our minds, and from the deepest places of knowing and feeling" (Oldfather, 1993).

One of my challenges in this inquiry was to be careful about developing my own looping story through interpreting the lives of others participating in the study. According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), the "researcher's imagination" is a fundamental

element to describing the lives of the participants. Through the collection of data from a variety of sources, I gathered descriptive evidence that illuminates the dispositions of the participants in a vivid manner. And through the understanding of these dispositions I have gained a better understanding of the underlying themes and emerging patterns that looping in this context brought about.

My Role as Researcher. Qualitative researchers aspire to interact with participants in their studies in a natural and non-threatening manner. Researchers can never eliminate all of their own effects on subjects in a study (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). The particular challenge for my interpretation was my past role as the middle school principal. There were some assumptions in my past role that I had to monitor. I believed that my previous tenure at the school, working there as principal for seven years, and the relationships that I had developed with the looping students and teachers allowed us to have open conversations not only about this program, but whatever needed to be discussed.

My new administrative position as Superintendent in a neighboring school district changed and significantly reduced the "power" relationship, as I no longer serve as a supervisor to any of the teachers in an evaluative role. Because, my title as administrator or Superintendent may convey a significant "power" influence, my intimate knowledge and shared history of this particular middle school was used to better understand and generate additional insights into the nature of looping practices.

Furthermore, I was challenged by my own subjectivity and experiences. How did I incorporate experiences that may or may not have biased my analysis? Where were my biases? How did my own expectations and experiences with looping, and my assumptions bias my analysis and reflection? The way I view the world constantly challenged my assumptions (Peshkin, 1992). I am sharing a "slice of life" as I saw it at the time. I tried to capture diverse perspectives and reactions through on going sharing

of the data with my teachers, parents, and students or also known as "member checking" (deMarrais, LeCompte, and McIntrye, 1998). Member checking involved sharing the looping stories with the participants in the study, especially the teachers since I believed they were eager to learn more about their students and in turn had the autonomy to adjust and influence their instruction accordingly.

A significant motivation for conducting this research was the limited study of looping at the middle school level. According to the 1996 National Middle School Association survey, few U.S. middle schools incorporate looping. I hope that this case study will contribute to middle level research. The findings reinforce developing positive relationships within a school community through a looping organization can contribute to the development of the adolescent student. Feelings of belonging enrich lives, promote higher levels of achievement, and may be one of the most effective deterrents of school violence in our schools (Meier, 2000). Researcher, Joan Lipsitz (1991) conducted case studies about effective middle schools that offered solutions and concrete models on what makes a middle school effective. Results from that study indicate that effective middle schools not only pursue competence in learning but they respond appropriately to the unique needs of the students through the development of strong positive relationships.

I was not interested in proving whether looping practice is a good or bad choice in how to educate middle school students because there is no one truth, only particular social, cultural, and historical situations. Rather, I wanted to examine relationships in al looping middle school and evaluate varied perspectives on the practice. As the middle school teaching staff and I have learned through varied experiences there is no one best way of educating adolescents, no absolute methodologies.

Because relationships are essential elements for teaching and learning, "what something means to individuals is dependent in the discourse available to them."

(Richardson, 1994). The description of looping was constructed, shaped by the development of the relationships between the participants in this middle school organization and their responses about looping practice in the middle school setting.

In conclusion, the traditions of qualitative inquiry reflect critical thinking and the examination and development of themes and patterns according to one's way of knowing or in other words an "epistemology." My way of knowing influenced what I observed, what I heard, and how I interpreted these perspectives and impressions. What did I learn about looping culture by observation and investigation? What was captured in this context from each of the participants? Qualitative research empowered me to make and challenge my own interpretations according to my contextual understanding of education and of human relationships in teaching and learning. Finally, as Glesne explains, "Qualitative inquiry is a search that leads into others' lives, your discipline, your practice, and yourself. True research does not end. Instead, it points the way for yet another search" (p. 199).

Research Context

This case study took place in a middle school composed of sixth through eighth graders. Each grade level has two teams of teachers with approximately 125 students each. The six teams of teachers (two per grade level) teach the core academic subjects – reading, language arts, math, science, and social studies. Another group of teachers have responsibility to instruct exploratory classes or electives (art, computers, drama, journalism, spanish, technology, and physical education) to all of the students. For purposes of confidentiality, the school in this study will be referred to as the "middle school" and the looping teams referred to as Team A and Team B. At the time of the study, Team A had four looping teachers and Team B consisted of five teachers. The students looped with their teachers only in seventh and eighth grade. The research was

conducted during the 8th grade year for each respective looping team (Team A – School year 2000-2001 and Team B – School year 2001-2002).

This school had been functioning as a middle school for about seven years. Previously, since the school opened in 1973, the school was a traditional junior high school with department heads who were in charge of curriculum and budget. The junior high school program mirrored that of a high school with honors classes in all subjects, elective classes, and a class schedule that was organized around the offerings of band and choir. The school program now reflects some of the essential elements of middle school philosophy with interdisciplinary teams of teachers, block scheduling, an advisory program, student-led conferences, and integrated instruction.

This middle school is the largest school in the district (800 students) with the three other district schools housing Kindergarten through Fifth grade. The total student population is slightly over 2,000 students. This K-8 elementary school district is part of a quaint, picturesque country town that is being challenged by urban development and increased population growth. The population of this community has been slowly increasing over the past seven years. With the most recent census the population is over 7,000, which has significantly impacted area schools, roads, and village services.

The area is a much-desired recreational attraction for people from the large metropolitan areas north and south. In fact, the economy of the town once relied on vacationers traveling to the area for hunting, fishing, dancing, and gambling. This village offers both visitors and residents beautiful lakes, rivers, parks and recreation including scenic woods. The downtown area of about three blocks is a replica of main street USA with specialty shops, restaurants, clothiers and services. The Chamber of Commerce works diligently to keep money in the local businesses and sponsors several community wide events to promote shopping in the downtown area. The village also supports the area schools by involving students in various community events and the voters most

recently passed an 11 million dollar referendum to build a new primary center (pre-kindergarten through first grade) and an extensive addition (17 classrooms, gymnasium, and expansion of cafeteria, library, and computer lab) to the existing middle school which would eventually house over 1000 students. The next challenge to the voters of this growing and changing community is to support the high school district's educational fund referendum coming up in the near future for voter approval.

The K-8 district's looping initiative was instituted by a previous Superintendent and elementary teaching staff to better develop and enhance academic and personal growth for each student. Looping had been a district practice (predominantly in grade one through five) for at least the last seven years in this elementary school district.

The most prevalent "loops" have occurred at grades one through five for a two-year cycle. Kindergarten students have not looped due to their half-day program. Grades 1-2, 3-4, and 4-5 have looping classrooms at each of the schools in this elementary district. For the most part, parents have had input into the looping process and have been given a choice of whether to place their student in a looping classroom or not. The exception to this parent input has occurred at the middle school level where students were randomly placed on the looping team beginning in seventh grade. Some parents did request their student not to loop to 8th grade with their teachers and from my understanding those few requests were granted.

The district looping initiative was mainstreamed into the middle school program five years ago. A building task force of volunteer staff was organized to study the concept of looping and to determine which upper grades would ultimately loop in the first pilot program. Through much discussion and debate, the task force recommended a 7th and 8th grade loop due to commonalities in both the academic and socio-emotional needs of the students. The teaching staff believed that the transition to 6th grade was too challenging for the students (moving from self-contained 5th grade in elementary

school to changing classes at the middle school) and that the maturity levels of the 7th and 8th grade students were more congruent for grouping. Also, there were more teachers who had taught both 7th and 8th grade students and more familiar with the curriculum of those respective grade levels.

One of the 7th grade teams was very enthusiastic to loop with their students to the next grade level. My challenge as the Principal (at that time) was to find an 8th grade team who would loop into the cycle at 7th grade. A staff survey was distributed to find out which teachers would be interested in the looping process. Only one 7th grade team volunteered to loop. None of the 8th grade teachers were ready to embrace this concept at this time and did not volunteer. One of the 8th grade teams had lost a team member for each of the past three years due to transfer, dismissal, or re-assignment. After careful consideration, I believed that this team needed to establish some consistency and continuity thus not making them a reasonable choice for looping at this time. So, I started my conversations with 8th grade Team B. There were many meetings and much discussion centering on the fact that they had experienced so many changes over the past couple of years but with input for scheduling, teaching assignments, and arranging students in classes, 8th grade Team B agreed to pilot the second group of students in the looping program.

By the end of the 1997 school year, two teams were to "loop" with their 7th and 8th grade students in the middle school. Team A started looping with students from 1997-1999 and Team B looped with their first group of students from1998-2000.

For this research study, Team A was in their *second* cycle of looping with their 8th grade students in the school year 2000-2001 – a data collection year. Team B began their *second* cycle of looping with their new 7th graders in 2000-2001 and data collection occurred in the 2001-2002 school year. As stated previously, I conducted the case study looping research with Team A & B and their 8th grade students.

Participants in the Looping Study

The participants in this looping case study were the students, teachers, and parents from this particular middle school during their 8th grade year of looping. Through in-depth interviews, open and close ended surveys, and observation of video-taped lessons, I gained more knowledge about looping practice. Several instruments and recording processes were utilized in the data collection. These instruments are listed in the Appendix section with the research design discussed later in this chapter. It was essential to reflect upon who the participants were and the environment or context for this case study, thus the following narrative about the participants.

Students. Most of the students in the looping study have been educated in this elementary district since their Kindergarten experience. Almost all of the students have lived in this small community for most of their lives. The students in this study were in the 8th grade. The students displayed typical middle school characteristics of adolescents – searching for identity, independence; displayed concrete to formal thought processes, etc. I believed it was important to understand these developmental aspects of the students because these characteristics influenced interactions. Other information included school report card data, achievement tests, transiency rate, attendance, and family poverty.

Teachers. Looping Team A has been working as together as a team for several years. Looping Team B had two teachers who had worked together previously and the other three teachers were new to the looping process and middle school. Most of the teachers have been working at this middle school for at least 10 years and most on the average have been teaching for over 15 years. Team A shares the teaching of language arts and they each teach another core academic subject (reading, math, science, and social studies). Team B members teaches in their content area as certified and plan advisory activities as well.

From my direct observations, the looping teams valued a forged sense of mission, understood the developmental needs of their adolescent students, and worked hard to create connected learning environments through shared subject and interdisciplinary teaching. They attempted to understand their students through mutual respect and the connections made through developing personalized learning environments. Each one of the looping teachers attended to students as individuals, promoting respect and care, rather than demeaning interactions, threats, or sarcasm. For the most part, the teachers were approachable. In my opinion, middle school students need an advocate and these teachers filled that role. At the time of this study, the teams of teachers in this middle school plan an advisory program, which is structured, planned academic or enrichment activities based upon the developmental needs of the students on their respective team. Extended learning opportunities, personal issues, discussion of ethical issues, and counseling were representative of some of the learning activities that were planned for the students in the advisory classes.

Parents. Most parents from this middle school were involved in the school community. Income levels are for the most part middle class in a small town of approximately 7,000 people which is growing very quickly with new development and structural city extensions. Families move here because it is a enhanced quality choice of lifestyle. Parents were concerned about education and recently supported an 11 million dollar referendum to build a new primary center (Pre-Kindergarten through First Grade) and add classrooms to the middle school. Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) seemed to function effectively at each school in the District. This is evident by the monthly meetings held, major fundraising efforts underway in all schools, and the number of volunteer hours that these parents spend in the schools. Each PTO also has an executive board with elected officers guided by a constitution and by-laws.

Through my experiences as a middle school principal, I have observed that parent involvement tends to decrease as the students get older. In some circumstances, I sense that the middle school students do not want their parents involved as they search for their independence, however, I am very interested in parents perspectives about the looping practice in this particular middle school. I feel that is it important to represent all of the perspectives in this school community, which has led me to learn more about looping practices.

Research Design and Methods Used in Data Collection

A qualitative case study is a detailed examination of a single setting or event (Merriam, 1998). In this middle school setting, the focus of my study was the looping participants – students, teachers, and parents. This case study was selected for its uniqueness in involving students, teachers, and parents from two different teams and what I hoped it would reveal about looping practice at the middle school level.

Qualitative researchers can employ several methods of data collection. I utilized primarily three methods of data collection for this study: 1) in-depth, open ended interviews, 2) open and close ended surveys, 3) observation through videotaping, and 4) written documents such as open-ended questionnaires and surveys, personal diaries, and program records (Patton, 1987).

In-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and parents. The looping team of teachers were interviewed in the beginning and towards the end of the school year. A list of guiding questions was prepared for each interview as evidenced in Appendix B, D, and E. I conducted all of the interviews. I also redirected or added questions to these interviews if I thought that I could elicit more information about a topic brought up in the interview. Each in-depth interview was recorded and transcribed. Each interview was scheduled for about thirty minutes.

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to discover the emergent themes. The typed interview transcripts followed a typical format where every time a new person speaks, a new line is started noting at the left margin who is speaking. When a speaker talks for a long period of time, the monologue is divided into paragraphs to facilitate coding. Categories of coding emerged as the data was analyzed for common themes. One category included commonalities and other codes were classified into various sub-headings of differing topics. For example, one theme that I expected to emerge from the students' perspective was a "feeling or sense of belonging." I believed that students may sense a strong feeling or sense of belonging as they develop relationships with their teachers over a two-year span or there may have been other reasons associated with this theme.

Six students and six parents from each looping team were scheduled to be interviewed individually. The students and parents selected for the in-depth interviews represent varied socio-economic status, gender, and low to high achievement levels. The looping team of teachers assisted in identification of the students for the interviews based upon their knowledge of those factors. Parents volunteered for their interview by completing a section of the parent survey giving their phone number to set up an appointment. Instruments for the in-depth interviews for students, teachers, and parents are listed in Appendix B, D, and E.

Observation. While interviews are a primary source of data in qualitative research, so too are observations. Participant-observation and in-depth interviewing are the best-known representatives of qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Observations took place in the looping classrooms through videotaping of looping classrooms.

Because I was concerned with context, (where looping is actually happening) observation through videotaping provided the opportunity for behavior to be better

understood when it was observed in the actual setting. Through this method of observation, I hoped to gain more insight into looping by conducting the in-depth interviews and analyzing videotaped looping classrooms. Due to my change of administrative position, access to the looping classrooms was somewhat constrained or not as natural as it would have been if I had still been working at the school. Thus, I chose to utilize videotaping as a method of observation.

Videotaping can enhance observation as it allows for density and permanence (Glesne, 1999). The density of the videotape poses advantages in that a large amount of data recorded is greater than one could possibly observe and because it is recorded the record is permanent allowing the researcher to return and review the observation (Bottorff, 1994). Videotaping makes it possible to review the observation and focus on different aspects of looping interactions involving student-to-student or student-to-teacher. Human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs. Data collected through this method provided insightful interpretation. Videotapes were analyzed and coded to determine emergent themes of looping practice. The data collected took the form of words and quotations rather than numbers (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Through this observation, I developed a deeper understanding of the looping process to learn what was different about a looping classroom, especially during the first couple of days of the school year. I also wondered if looping classrooms were organized differently for learning because teachers knew and understood their students better?

Open and close-ended surveys. Open-ended surveys were the third method of data collection. Students and teachers in the study completed open-ended surveys, as I was most interested in their responses to the middle school looping experience to capture their perceptions of teaching and learning. I hoped to learn from their perspectives what the key factors of looping practice were and what contributed to the

effectiveness or lack thereof, of this organizational learning environment. Open-ended surveys are listed in Appendix F and G.

The parents completed close-ended surveys in an effort to obtain as much participation as possible. Parents also had the opportunity to write their comments on their survey if their time permitted. To facilitate a high rate of return, the instruments were clearly written and easy to complete as listed in Appendices H and I.

I communicated with the participants in the study to explain the purpose of the study and my willingness to share the results. I coordinated the timing of the surveys with the team of teachers and they assisted me in facilitating the survey distribution to the students. Parent surveys were mailed to their resident address with a self-addressed return envelope. I provided teachers with the option of emailing the completed instrument or writing out the survey information. Due dates of two weeks determined a return timeframe for each instrument as listed in Appendix G.

Finally, by using a combination of methods to collect data for this case study, I hoped to illuminate and better understand the phenomenon of looping. As Patton (1990) points out, "by using a combination of interviewing, observations, and document analysis, the fieldworker is able to use different data sources to validate and cross-check findings."

Data Collection and Analysis

The social interactions and responses of looping practice were the framework for my research. Qualitative research is not a step-by-step or linear process. In my inquiry data collection, interpretation, and analysis were a simultaneous activities (Merriam, 1998). The data analysis process was on going and interactive. My description is the result of my analysis and interpretation of the data informed by my developing sense of what I was "hearing" from diverse voices about this shared looping experience. I was

not able to just describe data; data cannot speak for themselves (Wolcott, 1994). Through analysis of data, themes emerged -- other synonyms, other metaphors, and other connections. I had already gained insight into the practice of looping through informal conversations with teachers, students, and parents. My challenge throughout this study was to formalize inquiry and observation and interpret their experience and the meaning of those intersecting experiences in the looping context.

In interpreting my data, I was looking for key words, patterns, or alternative views that would reveal the meaning of participants' experience with looping practice, as well as help me make meaning of the whole experience. I hoped to make sense or unearth emerging themes of the looping experience. But what exactly is a theme? According to Max Van Manen, a researcher of human science, and author of *Researching Lived Experience* (1990), the "pedagogy of theme" is a fundamental research orientation.

1) Theme is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point.
2) Theme formulation is at best a simplification.
3) Themes are not objects one encounters at certain points or moments in a text.
4) Theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tried to understand. (p.87).

Once I identified the themes of the research, I sought to explain and articulate those lived experiences from each of the participants in the looping study. The themes described the lived meaning of looping. The following statements about the articulation of themes (Van Manen,1990) explains how these themes come about:

1) Theme is the needfulness or desire to make sense.
2) Theme is the sense we are able to make of something.
3) Theme is the openness to something.
4) Theme is the process of insightful invention, discovery, or disclosure (p.88).

The final aspect of defining themes relates to the relevance of these created images to the looping process or, in other words, reconstructing the looping experiences according to the perspectives of the participants.

1) Theme is the means to get at the notion.
2) Theme gives shape to the shapeless.
3) Theme describes the content of the notion.
4) Theme is always a reduction of a notion (p.88).

Harry Wolcott (1973), professor of anthropology and education, has written a well known educational ethnography, *The Man in the Principal's Office*. He describes the day- to-day life of an elementary school principal which provides a framework for conducting ethnography in the school setting. In his most recent book about qualitative data, *Transforming Qualitative Data* (1994) Wolcott provides distinguishes among data. I relate those distinctions to my study of looping:

1) description of data - what were the responses and perceptions of students, teachers, and parents engaged in looping?
2) analysis of data - what were the emerging themes or patterns of behavior associated with looping?
3) interpretation of data - what is to be made of all of this and what relevance does this have to middle school looping practices?

To carry out the research for this case study, access was confirmed through approval of the K-8 School District Board of Education granting permission to conduct this study. To comply with standard ethics for conducting a research project, protocol sheets were developed to explain the purpose of my study, sponsorship of the project, and review of rights of the participant in the study. The standard ethics protocol form is listed in Appendix A.

Additionally, the looping team of teachers, the administrative team at the middle school, secretarial staff, students and parents voluntarily agreed to cooperate in my efforts to complete this study. The Principal assisted in scheduling time for the looping teachers for the in-depth interviews as well as time for the students to complete the surveys. All instruments used in this research study are listed in the Appendix section.

To manage the data, I developed a coding system using the transcribed data. Coding helped me identify emerging themes both as looping practice and social interactions in this setting. The words of the participants were assigned a code and then statements were sorted on a spreadsheet to reconstruct the looping experience. This coding procedure created a framework for the data to provide an organized identification of emergent themes. This information was put together on separate spreadsheets according to the participants in the study – students, teachers, and parents. The student responses are included in Appendix J.

Verification of the data

Multiple sources of data collected contributed to the trustworthiness of the study. All aspects of the data will be interrelated (Wolcott, 1994). Through: interviews, surveys, and observations, I sought to provide a picture of looping through many lenses. Through multiple collection of data, trustworthiness and authenticity of research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was developed. To verify my study, I support a postmodern perspective of Richardson (1994) in that validity is reconceptualized as if looking at a crystal.

> The central image is the crystal. Which combines symmetry, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract from within themselves, creating different colors,

patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose. Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of "validity" and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know (p.522).

What I observed through my own lens depended upon my subjectivity, my perspectives in and of the world, and my knowledge of middle school educational looping practices, as well as my knowledge of study participants and their school setting. As the research unfolded, I was able to see other angles for approaching this inquiry. I preferred to verify my data, as validity presents an image of rigidity, fixed, and non-fluidity. Wolcott (1990a) also shares this idea of reconceptualization as he suggests that "validity neither guides nor informs" (p. 136). It is better to understand than try to convince – validity distracts from true understanding, does not capture the essence of what is trying to be understood.

In an effort to translate this understanding into practice, authenticity and trustworthiness was established using the exploring procedures of Creswell (1998).

1-Prolonged Engagement – closeness to participants

I worked with two looping teams in their 8th grade year. The study took place during the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 school years. I established relationships with all participants involved as I had worked as a Principal at the research school for the past seven years and reside in the school community.

2- Persistent Observation

This inquiry took place through the videotaping of looping classrooms, in-depth interviews of students, teachers, and parents over the course of two school years.

3- Multiple collection techniques

In-depth interviews, open and close-ended surveys, and observation of looping classrooms were the predominant qualitative methods that I employed to analyze and interpret the data.

4-Peer review and input

I shared my study with several of my doctoral program colleagues who asked unbiased questions and discussed my research with me.

5-Subjectivity reflection

I needed to clarify my experiences and portray to the reader my position and any biases or assumptions that may be or were inherent in this case study.

6- Member checking

I shared my data with the team of teachers involved in the study. They may have had a different perspective or interpretation that I may not have considered. They also were judges of accuracy, checked quotes, and verified the credibility of the research.

Using a multiple perspectives as Creswell describes, I developed and supported the verification of my study. Verification is a distinct strength to the inquiry process afforded through qualitative research. In other words, exploratory procedures all add to the value of the study (Creswell, 1998).

Summary of the Methodology

In summary, the key features of my methodology for the case study included: 1) in-depth interviews of students, teachers, and parents, 2) open and close-ended surveys of students, teachers, and parents, and 3) observation, through videotaping, of looping classrooms. The collection of data occurred in the second year of looping while the students were in the 8th grade using two different looping teams of teachers. The next

chapter presents the data and describes emergent themes based on the methodologies used in this study.

Chapter Four
Data

Overview

The data for this two year case study of students, teachers, and parents engaged in looping at the middle school level consisted of: 1) in-depth interviews, 2) open and close ended surveys, and 3) observation of students through video-taping of looping classrooms and 4) other artifacts collected in the research process.

I was most interested in the perspectives of the looping participants and their perceptions about the looping process. Through this analysis and collection of data, I discovered the students', teachers', and parents' feelings, ideas, and attitudes about this pedagogical design.

I organized the data from the study participants beginning with the students, then the teachers, and thirdly, the parents. In each participant section, I provide a brief overview of each methodology and the responses collected. Emergent themes from each methodology are discussed in this chapter.

Students

Student voice was an important aspect of this case study. Throughout this qualitative inquiry, my goal was to learn more about the world of these middle school students, their social realities, understandings, and values of schooling in the context of looping. I share here what I have learned from student responses, opinions, and observed behavior from the in-depth interviews, open-ended surveys, and video taping of looping classrooms.

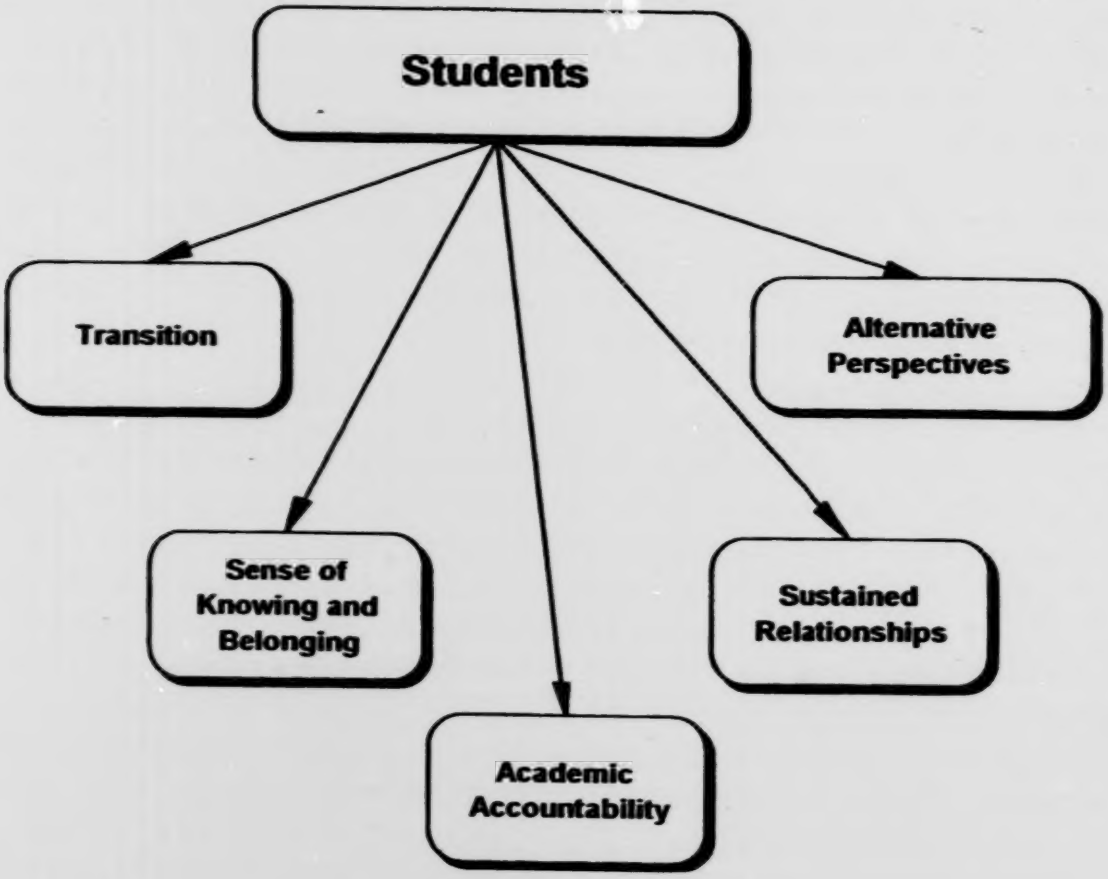
In-depth interviews. To hear student voices individually, I interviewed twelve students in their 8th grade year of looping. The interviews occurred six weeks into the school year for each group of students. I conducted interviews at the school site after

receiving permission through parent permission forms in Appendix A. The students were selected randomly by the team of teachers based upon varied: socio-economic status, gender, and achievement levels. Students were asked fourteen open-ended questions as in Appendix B. and each interview was taped. Each recorded interview was transcribed, then coded to ascertain emergent themes and patterns associated with the looping process from the student perspective. I also reviewed other artifacts pertaining to each individual student, such as progress or report cards from 6-8th grade as well as state and local standardized achievement test results to gain a better holistic understanding of each student.

In general, the students were at ease during the interviews and seemed to enjoy being involved in the study. I had previously known most of the students in my role as the former Principal, however not for disciplinary reasons as one might associate with knowing the administration. For the majority of students interviewed I had developed relationships with each of them through my supervisory responsibilities, classroom visits, and involvement in student activities. I knew something of a personal nature about each and every one of them from daily interaction in the school setting. During the interview process, some of the students exhibited nervous laughter but after talking for a few minutes and sharing some personal information about themselves (age, birthday, and hobbies outside of school) they were spontaneous, honest, and interactive.

After reading each of the transcribed interviews, I reviewed each interview several times and highlighted statements that were specific to my professional experiences of looping practice. The statements were circled and underlined in an effort to isolate different thematic statements. The emergent themes from the interviews set the framework in which to work with as I reviewed the remaining data. (See Table 2 on next page for student themes). The themes that were prevalent were identified as follows:

Table 2 Student Themes – Middle School Looping Case Study



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1) *Transition:* The students experienced a reduced anxiety about starting 8th grade or in other words a "seamless" transition from 7th to 8th grade;

2) *Sense of knowing and belonging:* There was a sense of comfort expressed by the students in knowing what to expect and in knowing teachers and peers on the looping team, there were known mutual expectations of both students and teachers. Students also expressed that they knew they could approach their teachers if they had a concern or problem;

3) *Academic Accountability:* There was a keen sense of understanding teacher expectations, work commitment, and an understanding that the looping teachers knew the academic strengths and weaknesses of their students;

4) *Sustained relationships with teachers and peers:* The looping process intentionally put students and teachers together for two years. For 80% of the students there was agreement with this arrangement;

5) *Alternative Perspectives:* 20% of the looping students stated their preferences for meeting new teachers and friends instead of the looping arrangement.

While every spoken word or reply has not been included in this chapter, I have carefully reviewed the transcripts of the in-depth interviews, coded patterns and differences of looping experiences, and listened to the tape recordings several times in an effort to illuminate the students' lived meaning of looping. I quote specific interview responses to give authentic voice to the participants and in essence tell their story about looping at the middle school level. Finally, to ensure confidentiality yet maintain a personal approach, I used a pseudonym for each student name maintaining gender and

ethnicity. Because I think each participant's story has unique merit, I have included a synopsis of each of the twelve interviews in this chapter. The twelve students' looping stories are as follows:

Lynn

Lynn is a quiet and reserved honor student. Her teachers share that she is a pleasure to work with and is very cooperative. Despite her shyness, she was very talkative and made good eye contact with me during the interview. Making the transition to 8th grade was smooth for her as evidenced by her enthusiasm in sharing the following response, "I was glad school was starting. I wasn't nervous at all. I already knew all of my teachers and I knew how they teach, I was happy and excited." I also asked her if she thought other students were feeling the same way and she indicated, "Yeah, its easy because you don't have to do that 'getting-to-know-your-teacher' thing." There was one new science teacher to the looping team (due to the former teacher taking another job) and that seemed to be a topic of conversation for Lynn and her friends before school started. I also asked her if she was surprised about anything else in the beginning of the year. She replied, "No, nothing was really new. I like things being the same, it just makes things a whole lot simpler." According to Lynn, consistency made her life simpler in the transition to 8th grade. Developing relationships with teachers for Lynn has been a good experience. "My teachers are friendly, if you really like your teachers you're going to know them better and they're going to know you." She also believes that she is close with her teachers and believes that her peers are close to the teachers as well. If she had a serious problem, she would talk to her homeroom teacher as she talks to her a lot. Lynn's dad is frequently away on business and not around as much as she would like. As she implies, she has made a real connection with her homeroom teacher. While transition to 8th grade was relatively easy, transition to high school is of some concern to Lynn as she is not attending the feeder high school in town. Her parents want her to

attend a private high school. She is worried most about meeting different people and getting lost in a big school. If she was given the choice to loop with her teachers she replied, "Yes, I'd do it again. I wish I could do it in high school.

Manuel

The next interview was with Manuel, a fourteen year-old adolescent who had struggled academically since 6th grade as evidenced by his progress reports and achievement test data. Though Manuel is a pleasure to work with and respectful to others, his teachers indicate his missing assignments really lower his grades. He is showing improvement, however. I do wonder if some of Manuel's academic challenges are due to his cultural background and, as he indicated, the lack of English spoken at home. Manuel was very pleasant and courteous to interview. He was very excited about his upcoming birthday. He is involved in the choir and enjoys math and computers here at school. He was not nervous about starting the school year because he had the same teachers. Manuel also indicated that, "compared to starting school as a 6th grader this was really easy." The only thing Manuel was worried about was the new science teacher on the looping team as he was assigned to her for homeroom. I asked him, "What were you thinking about your new homeroom teacher?" Manuel's face showed concern as he said, "I didn't know what she'd expect. That was the only thing I was worried about." He feels comfortable in her class now as, "she laughs about everything. . . she tells jokes and stuff." When asked if having teachers for two years has been good for you, he nods his head "yes." "Yeah, because they already know what you can do. You don't have to prove yourself like you do if you have new teachers." This was the longest response given to me since the interview started. I probed him further and asked, "What are some of the things they say to you about your ability?" He was quick to answer. "I think you should try harder, I know that you can do it, and stuff like that." And he shook his head more, smiled, and agreed that those comments were accurate.

He also went on to share that he felt closer to his teachers this year. "I can talk to them and stuff. Last year they were dealing with everyone." (Because I was familiar with the team of teachers and students I knew he was making reference to a few other students that were having significant disciplinary problems). Manuel likes school better this year as he says, "I already know who my teachers are. I already know them. I don't have to get to know the teachers." While Manuel has never discussed a personal problem with his teachers, he feels that he could talk to at least two of the looping teachers on the team if he needed to. If given a choice to loop he would do it again. He also felt that relationships with his peers were improved, as he indicates, "we just get along better this year." I wondered how that happened and he said, we work on being nice, don't be mean and stuff like that." He feels that thinking about high-school is "nerve-racking," "the high school counselors make it sound like it's...you can't do this or that, lots and lots of rules." He hasn't decided what classes he would like to take, and recently missed the high school open house. However, by his nonchalant attitude and facial expression, that seemed to be just fine with him as he seemed not too concerned.

Christopher

Christopher is an above average student thirteen year old adolescent who enjoys recreational activities such as golf and skiing. He is a very positive young man and seems to be in a happy mood. His teachers believe that he is well organized, prepared, and produces an exceptional quality of work. Chris felt that 7th grade was a little scary, as his eyebrows raised and eyes widened. But in 8th grade he smiles and says, "I was excited and just wanted to come in and get started." He was not nervous about starting school and had talked with his friends about the first days of school. I asked him, "What did you talk about in regard to the beginning of school?" He stated, "It's going to be a lot of fun. We know the teachers and they know our expectations and what we're capable of doing." He was also enthused about his homeroom teacher, "She's a good teacher

and I had her last year, too." When asked about having the same teachers for two years he responded quite frankly, "Yeah, it was good because we did get a new teacher. And it takes her a while to realize who's capable of doing really good work and if someone's not capable of doing a really good job, if I turn in "slop," then she doesn't know that I'm capable of doing a lot better." Chris went on to say that he felt closer to his teachers because, "they know us and we know them and how they teach." I thought it was interesting when our conversation took a different direction from the questioning when Chris told me that he liked school better this year. I asked him, "Why is that?" "Well, we're 8th graders....we know the teachers and we have a lot more freedom." In his mind, knowing his teachers allowed him (in his words) "to be more independent and stuff like that." Like Manuel in the previous interview, he thinks that the team of teachers work well with the students on getting along. "They don't like us teasing each other. They want us to get along and try to work things out." If given the choice to loop, Chris indicates a definite "Yeah." And then he was quick to add, "I don't' want to go to high school. It's a lot bigger, there are more kids, it's a really big change." Transition to the 9th grade seems to be of some concern to these students when asked about their thoughts on going to high school.

William

William is an avid bowler, plays the guitar and likes to hang out with his friends. It appears by his standardized test results that he had some reading challenges in his elementary career. However, he seems to have overcome those deficiencies over the past couple of years and is an above average honors student. William displays much enthusiasm in the classroom and his teachers commend him for being well organized, prepared, and cooperative. According to William, the first day back to school as an 8th grader was fun. "I thought it would be really fun seeing the teachers." He goes on to

say, "I like them a lot. They let us talk and we always do homework in class together. If you need help they'll always help us and not tell us to sit down."

William believed that he could ask questions of his teacher because, "I know them from last year." He loves school and was not nervous about starting a new year. When we talked about his conversations with friends before school started he agreed that people were comfortable knowing they were going to be together again as a group. He was very pleased about having his homeroom teacher because, "she's really understanding, she's never mean or mad about anything." The idea of being comfortable came up again when I asked him if he thought that having the teachers for two years was good for him? "Yeah, you feel more comfortable around them." I probed him on how the rest of his peers would react to this question. He replied, "Some of them goof around a lot." He felt that was probably because everyone knows the teachers and where to draw the line because they know each other so well. William also felt closer to his teachers this year. "Last year I was really quiet and wouldn't talk to them until the last couple of days. This year I know them better and I can talk more." He likes school better this year as, "it's a lot easier, not as much homework and you know the teachers better." William also has two teachers whom he believes he can talk to if he had a serious personal problem because as he says, "I know them well."

Monica

Monica is musically inclined and has played the guitar since age seven. She also enjoys watching television and hanging out with her friends. Monica is an above average student; however, according to her teachers she was not always working up to her potential and much more capable of doing better academically. Despite this, she improved her below average grades (1.4-2.0 GPA) during her 8th grade year to honor roll status at 3.5 out of a 4.0 scale. Her teachers also add that she is respectful to others and is a pleasure to work with. Coming back to school on the first day of 8th grade for

Monica was a chance to get reacquainted with her friends as she had spent the summer in Arizona. "It was different to be back but I was glad I was back because I didn't have anything to do." She shared that she was "kind of nervous" about coming back to school but felt having the same teachers helped her adjust. She was glad to be assigned to her homeroom teacher, "because I like her, she's really nice, she's a good teacher." I then was curious and asked Monica to elaborate on this statement, "What makes a her good teacher?" Monica was quick to reply, "She teaches me a lot, she's patient. When I have questions, she's understanding and answers them." Monica also believed that having the same teachers was good for her. "I think so because I got used to all the teachers and what the rules are and how they teach." So, I said to her, "if you don't turn in something are they on top of that right away?" She replied, "The teachers can talk to me about it. I pretty well know what's expected of me." In regard to talking with teacher's about a personal issue, she would talk to her homeroom teacher, "because she listens, and I know her really well." Monica has had her share of personal problems at school as evidenced by past discipline referrals and frequent parent contact by the team of teachers, so I was very interested in her response to the next question, "Do you like school better this year, the same, or less?" Pensively she replied, "I like it better because I don't get in trouble a lot." I asked her why she thought those problems were happening to her. "Probably because of the friends I hung out with." I was interested to learn how she made those changes and asked her to explain in more detail. "Well, I just stopped hanging out with them pretty much. When I started hanging out again with them, I told them I wasn't going to get in trouble." If given the opportunity to loop with her teachers, Monica agrees with the looping arrangement. She is also worried about the transition to high school. "Everything I know won't be there any more. Friends will, but it will be a big building." Even though Monica had made some dramatic changes in her peer group and significantly improved her grades, unfortunately, she didn't graduate

with her class due to a serious disciplinary infraction three weeks before the end of the school year resulting in expulsion.

Deanna

Deanna was thirteen (as of) mid-July and enjoys fishing on the channel by her home. She enjoys science, especially "when doing experiments, blowing things up, and taking things apart." She had a difficult transition to the middle school in 6th grade adjusting to the workload and did not perform to her academic potential as determined by her teachers. Her grades improved slightly in 7th grade, but it's been an academic struggle for her. She tested below average in most concept areas of standardized testing (state and local) but has not been identified with a learning disability. Her teachers indicate that she is a pleasure to work with and cooperative. However, she finds some subject matter difficult. According to her teachers, missing assignments and excessive absences have contributed to low scores on homework and final grades. Her memories of the first day of school were as follows, "It felt the same. When I think back it felt like the beginning of 7th grade because I had the same teachers. I still consider myself in 7th grade because I have the same teachers." Deanna really enjoyed her summer and was sad to have to come back to school because every day in the summer she got to sleep in until noon. Deanna was "kind of scared" as she put it about her homeroom teacher. "He can be grouchy sometimes, but then he's pretty cool and makes jokes." Having the same teachers has been good as Deanna explains, "For my grades, yes, but not for my excuses." I asked her to explain in more detail. "They know them all (her excuses)...I think it's better because you know them. You know what they expect out of you instead of going back to start with new teachers and have to figure it out." Deanna has liked being with the same teachers for two years and reiterates, "You know who they are, it's not like in 6th grade when you got one set of teachers and in 7th you got a different set." She feels closer to her looping teachers, except for the new

science teacher. Deanna likes school *less* this year as she is feeling under pressure to perform. "You have the Constitution test and all of those tests at the end of the year just to graduate. Last year in 7th grade you could just finish." I asked her if she thought if her teachers could help her deal with this pressure. And she replied, "If they were new this year, I'd be scared to ask them, but now that I know them, I can just go up and ask them for help." Deanna also expressed that she believes she could approach her homeroom teacher if she had a personal problem. "I don't know how to put this, she's younger, she gives you a couple of choices. If you don't like them you can do what you want. She's not telling you what to do exactly." Deanna is not only very concerned about graduating from 8th grade but very apprehensive about going on to the high school. "People at the high school hate me because I'm known as bad to them. Over the summer I got into a couple of fights with some high school girls. It's stupid. But my mom and brother are there too, so nothing should really happen." If given the chance to loop again, Deanna agrees that she would do this again. "You know who they are. It's not like going to someone who you don't know their requirements."

Amy

Amy is a 14 year-old girl who enjoys biking and swimming. She is somewhat tall for her age yet carries herself fairly well. She is friendly and easy to talk with. Her teachers indicate that Amy is very cooperative, participates well in class and exhibits a very positive attitude. Her grades over the past three years are fairly steady at slightly above average grade point average. Standardized test scores show that she met performance levels and demonstrates proficient knowledge and skills in the subjects tested. When asked about he first day of school she replied, "it was different, the same school just different because of the new construction – I got lost." When asked if she was worried about starting the school year she expressed, "No, I was not nervous. I pretty much knew the teachers, same people in my team and class. Not like in 6th grade

where you didn't know the people that you were going to be with or the routines." In regard to her opinion about having the same teacher for two years, she says, "Yeah-cause they already know who you are...they know what you might do and or stuff. You know the teachers and you know what they're going to do....It's easier to tell and easier to do work 'cause you know how they want you to do it and how it's supposed to be done...." When asked if the teachers know her better as a person and how she best learns she affirmed," Yes, they really know me well." She was somewhat shy in sharing her thoughts about feeling closer to teachers this year. "Kinda....it's just, I don't know...it's a feeling...(then she laughs a little)." She likes school better this year because they have more room, it's not so crowded. She would talk to two of her looping teachers if she had a problem, "cause they seem to understand more...and one is younger and that she would know more." If given the choice to loop, she reflects, "probably, because I already know them."

Lydia

Lydia enjoys cheerleading and gymnastics outside of school. Her favorite subject is Math but laments that Science is very challenging for her. Lydia is a high honors student achieving straight A's on several occasions throughout her middle school career. The looping teachers feel that she is very motivated and her efforts in class are commendable. They also recognize Lydia's organizational skills and believe that she is always prepared for class. The first day of school was "weird" (in her terms) as she laughed while thinking about the day. She knew her homeroom teacher, but didn't really know the rest of her schedule. She was not nervous about starting school because as she says, "I've done it so many times every year." I sensed that she was a little nervous in the interview as she was somewhat giddy and laughed quietly after several of my questions. I asked, "Did your friends seem nervous about starting school?" And she replied, "No, not really, 'cause they knew the teachers except for the new Math teacher.

She also shared with me, that she wasn't happy with her assigned homeroom teacher as she had wanted a different teacher whom she thought was "cool and fun" to be around. Having the same teachers was good for her as she said, "Yeh, because you know them...you don't really have to start all over. Like you know the teachers and you know how they are going to act, you know their rules." She "kinda" liked being with her same teachers for two years but goes on to say, "it's kinda boring, 'cause when you have different teachers you get to know other people." She agrees that her teachers know her well and they make her work harder. She likes school about the same as last year because the teachers are the same. She has made a connection with one of the looping teachers and would approach her if she had a personal problem because, "I'm not afraid to talk with her." When asked if given the choice to loop, she was contemplative, "it would depend with what teachers."

Tad

Tad is thirteen and the drum corps is a pretty important part of his life. He takes lessons every week as well as attending band practices at the middle school. He likes science because, "We do all sorts of different stuff, experiments, and math...I'm just good at it." Tad is very good at much of his academic work as he exceeds standards and demonstrates advanced knowledge and skills in almost every content area or subject. He had perfect scores on two of the state assessment tests this past year. His teachers indicate that he is respectful towards others, very cooperative and a pleasure to work with. When asked about the first day of school he said, "I think, I thought of it as a sort of a continuation from last year because all of the same teachers, nothing completely new, except the new building." He was not nervous about starting the new school year. He laughed when he told me that one of his friends does not care for school and wasn't looking forward to it. Tad continued his response to that thought, "I get bored a lot, I got to do something." When asked if he talked about his teachers with his friends he

comfortably replies, "I didn't have nothing to complain about. I like all of my teachers, so it works for me." He was happy to find out who his homeroom teacher was, "She's friendly, a good teacher, cares a lot about kids." To the question about having teachers for two years and if he thought if that was good for him he responds, "Sure, I think, well this is me...nah, I'd say it's a little more educational since 'cause they know you, know your limitations and what not. Yes, they know me as a person." Having the same teachers for two years was agreeable with Tad and seems to be a good fit, "They are friendly teachers you know, they teach me a lot – I'm pretty curious." He enjoys school more this year and he feels, "it's just more fun than last year." If Tad needed to talk with a teacher about a personal problem he knows of two teachers he would personally seek out because, "I'm close with them, I trust them.....they would listen." Finally when asked if he would loop again, Tad indicated to me that he had previously looped in elementary school in 2nd & 3rd grade and in 4th & 5th grade. "Yes, uh (he laughs again), like again, I like my teachers, I'm comfortable with them, I like their rules and stuff."

Charlie

Charlie is a sports-minded thirteen year-old who enjoys basketball and football. He enjoys band as well, as he believes it's challenging and seems to very rewarding. His favorite classes are Math and Art. He can't seem to tell me why he likes Math but, "I like being creative in Art." Charlie is an honor student who exceeds the state standards for learning in the areas of science and social studies. His achievement scores on other achievement tests range from the middle to high range of performance for his age group. Charlie's recollection of the first day of school as an 8th grader was an easy one for him, "I had pretty much the same teachers, made it a little bit easier...not nervous, same students, same teachers." He knew what homeroom he was assigned to as his teacher had told him she asked for him last spring. Charlie was happy about that and likes her because she listens a lot. He likes 8th grade year more this year as, "I get a full

semester of art and I think there's more opportunities in 8th grade than in other grades. His thoughts on being with the same teachers for two years were mixed. "Yes, I get to...um..I kinda know what to expect. I have some more background information on them and they on me, too. They know what my work is, so they grade me that way." However, he wonders about meeting new teachers and new people if he didn't loop as he feels, "it's good to know more people, you get to meet other friends."

Robert

Playing video games, biking and playing with friends is the way this fourteen year old likes to spend his time outside of school. Robert's favorite classes are science and physical education, "Science is interesting and PE is fun." Academic performance has not been a priority for Robert as he has performed at the below average level since 6th grade. His teachers reflect while he is a pleasure to work with he is capable of doing much better. His missing assignments and low homework grades greatly impact his overall performance. Robert's performance on standardized tests indicate that he is just below the standards to meet state level achievement benchmarks. In fact, he missed meeting those standards by just one point in the science and social studies areas of testing. Robert was excited to start school as an 8th graders as his perceived social class on the bus was enhanced, "I was really excited, it's fun knowing that you could sit in the back of the bus." I then remembered some of the unspoken rules that 8th graders promote like always sitting in the back of the bus and no grade level dare sit in those seats, it was their perceived culture on the bus. He wasn't nervous about starting school, "I knew people, who knew me...I knew what to expect." He was assigned to a new homeroom teacher but he was agreeable with that. When asked about having the same teachers for two years, he thought it was good for him because, "teachers know what to expect out of me and I know what to expect of the teachers." He also shared

that he got to know the teachers better by talking with them. Despite this, he only feels a little bit closer to his teachers this year, "just because I know them a little better."

Marcie

Marcie is looking forward to her 14th birthday next week. She is quite shy and transferred to the middle school just over a year ago. She plays the piano and has been taking private lessons for 5 years. Singing is also a favorite pastime as she had joined the Concert Choir. The subject of Language Arts comes easy for her and as she puts it, "I like Math because it makes you think." Her achievement is exemplary, as she has achieved straight A honor roll since her 7th grade year. Yet, her achievement on standardized tests indicates an average ability level with just meeting state standards in the social science area. Marcie's teachers reflect that she is a pleasure to work with and very cooperative. She described her start to the school year as "overwhelming," as there seemed to be a lot of homework right from the beginning. Despite this feeling, she was not entirely nervous as she got to see a lot of her friends. She remembers talking to her friends about the start of school and in particular about one of the Math teachers that was retiring, so they were thinking about what this new Math teacher was going to be like. She was happy to know who her homeroom teacher was going to be at the end of last school year. "Yeah, I'm happy about that, she's really nice and always liked me, I wouldn't have any trouble with her." She gave a very definitive and quick answer when asked if having the same teachers for two years was good for her. "Yes, they know my progress. I'm really shy, so it's hard for me to like getting involved in classes when I don't know people very well. It was a problem last year, so they have helped me this year. They talked to my mom about it and once I got to know them it was all over." Marcie also believes that she is closer to her teachers this year, "Well, I do, they're just not my teachers they're like almost my friends, older friends. I feel very comfortable with them." Marcie seems to like school about the same this year and she feels that she gets

a lot of homework. Marcie also feels that if she had a personal problem there is a teacher who she can talk to, in fact, last year, she worked with the teacher and solved a peer relationship conflict. The interview concluded with the question of whether she would choose to loop with her teachers if given a choice, "Yes, like I said before, I'm not really good to work with people that I don't really know."

The in-depth interview approach using primarily open-ended questions revealed the reconstruction of looping experience according to the student's perspective. The themes uncovered are not objects or generalizations, but according to human science researcher, van Manen, "metaphorically speaking are more like the knots in the web of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaning wholes" (1990, p. 90). The emergent themes from this aspect of data collection became the framework in which to analyze the remaining data as I anticipated similarities of themes amongst participants. I also believed that alternative perspectives of looping experiences would be more apparent if compared to a set framework of themes. (See Table 2.)

Student open-ended surveys. The questions were developed to obtain information about how all of the 8th grade looping students experienced the first couple days of school as they made the transition from 7 to 8th grade as well as to discover how they viewed relationships with their teachers and peers on the looping team. Sixteen questions were asked of students as outlined in the Appendix F. I personally administered the surveys, provided instructions and collected the surveys in an envelope. No student names were required as part of the survey. I knew most of the students in my previous role as Principal, so it was comfortable for me to administer the survey and answer questions. I encouraged the students to express their opinions as I valued their input and wanted to better understand their experiences at the middle school. Most students were finished in about 20 minutes and seemed interested in

participating. The survey was given in the late morning. The teachers' selected the date and time in which to administer the survey so not to conflict with other instructional activities. From Team 8A (2000), I administered 104 surveys out of a possible 108. From Team 8B (2001), I administered 120 surveys out of 135 for a total of 224 student surveys.

To create an organizational framework, I developed a spreadsheet to list responses from the survey questions. Responses were typed in after each of the questions. I reviewed the student surveys to code and highlight looping themes that were previously identified from the student interviews. The themes of: transition; sense of knowing and belonging; academic accountability; sustained relationships with teachers and peers; and alternative perspectives were very prevalent. It is important to note that a few of the identified themes from the student surveys such as: relationships with peers and transition emerged more frequently than in the in-depth interviews. I will discuss the resonance of alternative perspectives and relationships with looping students and what meaning I have associated with this aspect of data collection in the next chapter.

I also thought it would be interesting to divide the surveys into favorable and unfavorable responses to the looping process. I defined unfavorable as three or more comments that were negative about the looping process and/or their relationships with teachers and peers. The results of the Team A grouping out of 104 surveys, were 84 of those surveys were favorable about the looping process, and 16 were unfavorable. For Team B, 82 surveys were favorable with 23 unfavorable. Fifteen of the surveys were not included as the surveys were either left blank, students did not loop from last year as written on the top of their survey, or the answers did not address the questions of the survey. From strictly a numerical perspective, 81% of the students surveyed from Team

A had favorable comments about the looping process and 78% of the students surveys from Team B indicated favorable responses as well.

To share this aspect of data collection I have organized a synopsis of responses according to the emergent themes from the student interviews as previously listed. A complete listing of the student survey results can be found in Appendix J.

Emergent themes from the student surveys

Transition. From my professional experience in working with middle school students, adolescents face many transitions and experience many changes as they are going through puberty. Developmentally they are changing physically, intellectually, and socio-emotionally. Compound these changes with the strong desire to be accepted by others and relate well to their peers, adolescents are under tremendous social and peer pressure without even considering any aspects of schooling.

Beginning a new school year can be challenging for those students who are meeting new teachers for the first time as well as assimilating themselves into the culture of schooling (Elias, 2001). Successful transitions are critical success factors in the education of young adolescents. I wanted to learn more about how students viewed the beginning of their second year with the same group of teachers and peers. The looping participants predominantly stated that they were not nervous about starting a new school year because they knew their teachers and the students very well on their academic team.

"I felt very happy starting 8th grade with the same teachers. I knew them and didn't have to get to know any other teams of teachers."

"It was cool. I knew everybody. It was nice to know everyone – not a lot of mix-ups."

"It was easier than starting with all new teachers, you knew the boundaries and limits."

"I felt comfortable and settled right in on the first day."

"I was happy I looped, I felt comfortable starting again, it was much easier."

"It was great because you have absolutely no stress going back to school for the first time – a lot more comfortable."

"I think that it was cool because we didn't have to learn new teachers expectations – this was way better than 6th & 7th grade."

"I knew my teachers already so I wasn't nervous. The first couple of days were fun and stressless."

"I was comfortable and calm. I was more relaxed knowing that I already know the teachers."

The majority of students surveyed viewed this transition from 7th to 8th grade as relatively simple and easy. The start of a new school year did not create anxiety or nervous worry and most students believed that they started learning from the first day. According to those students,

"It was easier knowing what the teachers were going to expect from you. "

"The first couple of days were easy, I wasn't nervous."

"I think it is better, you don't have to be nervous, no worries."

"We started learning right away, they knew our names."

"They already know us and have a reason to give us homework."

"The first couple of days were normal because everyone knows everyone."

"We didn't get to waste class time."

"We came in and knew what to expect. We knew what the teachers were like."

"I liked it because we already knew all the expectations and rules."

"I thought it was better because we knew our teachers and what they expected."

"It was like 7th grade, just more advanced."

"I like looping because I am more comfortable around the teachers."

For students who viewed themselves as shy or reserved, their first day impressions were similar,

"I liked it because they already knew me and I knew them, so I wasn't shy."

"It was a normal feeling, it seems like we got to know them better and

what to expect."

"You didn't have to try to figure out their personalities."

"I thought it was cool because I already knew my teachers and did not have to be shy."

From the 17% unfavorable responses (39 out of 224 surveys) the majority of responses to the question about the beginning of school centered on the theme of alternative perspectives. A few students believed that the beginning of school was boring for them and they did not think it was fair that they had to loop with their teachers and peers. They had not been given the choice to loop. All students were assigned for looping at random by computer scheduling. If these students had chosen their team of teachers, they would have selected different teachers as they felt they needed the opportunity to learn from different styles of teaching and grouped with new friends. Almost every response from these individuals indicated that they did not like their teachers. I will expand this discussion of their responses in the alternative perspectives section.

Unlike the smooth transition experienced for most 8th grade looping students, most of them were concerned and nervous about making the transition to high school. Here are some of their thoughts:

"I'm scared, I don't want to leave my friends, I'll lose the closeness."

" I'll have to adjust to everything – teachers, sports, friends, etc."

"I'm nervous about teachers and homework."

"I'm nervous, the school is so big and I won't know anyone."

"I do not like the idea at all."

"I'm kind of scared due to bomb threats and guns."

"I don't wanna go, school is going to become harder, I'm not ready for it."

For some students, the transition to high school posed an opportunity or chance for a new beginning and was viewed as another rite of passage.

"I am excited to get on with my life and forget my past."
"I'm looking forward to meeting new people but will miss it here."
"Excited but scared."
"I'm a little nervous about the amount of homework and all of the kids."
"I'm excited about the extra-curricular classes and hope to succeed."
"Scared, but it's best to move on...."
"I can't wait because now it counts for something and that motivates me."
"I may not be ready for it."
"I'm moving up to the big leagues, that's scary and nervous."
"I think it will be fun, I will miss the teachers I know well."
"I'm glad to get to high school with new teachers and a new way to learn."
"It is a big step to take and I hope my teachers can get me ready. I feel grown-up when I think about high-school."

In conclusion, the idea of transition was not a major issue for the majority of looping students (including those students with alternative perspectives) as they viewed the beginning of the school year as relatively simple, easy, and fun. However, as compared to their thoughts on making the transition to the high school, students were more concerned about the unknown expectations, fear of losing friends, possible violence, and getting lost on a large high school campus. Looping in this context helped diminish anxiety in starting a new school year for 8th grade students however, as these students make the transition to high school, anxiety becomes a major concern.

Sense of Knowing and Belonging. This theme illuminates the idea of *metacognition* or in other words, one's sense of understanding and knowing their reality. The data reveals that approximately 80% of the looping students felt comfortable with their teachers due to strong interpersonal connections with their teachers through the process of looping. Having the same teachers for two years had been a positive experience for most of these looping students as they recognized instructional benefits to this arrangement. Here are some of those insights:

"I have a comfortable feeling, no pressure."

"It has been good for me to have the same teachers for two years because we can start off where we left off."

"They have more chances to get to know you."

"It has been good but also bad at times. They know what to expect from you and they're disappointed if you do worse than normal."

"They know I'm a good student already and I don't have to prove my ability over and over again."

"They know what I'm capable of."

"You get to know how they grade – they also know your strengths and attitudes towards things."

"Yes, because we grow in the teacher/student relationship – they know you."

"They know my strengths and weaknesses."

"I've become closer with them more and asking for help."

"I knew everybody and I knew my teachers. I knew what they expected with my assignments and I felt "confident" in myself."

Additionally, school transition has been a positive experience for most students as they express a knowledge level of comfort and familiarity associated with having teachers for two years.

"I think it has because I know the teachers and feel better – I am not nervous."

"Yes, because you don't have to worry about having new teachers."

"It's easier when you don't have to start over with new teachers."

"I am more comfortable with them."

"They know me and how to help me."

"Yes, you can get started on work right away, you don't have to spend the first week getting to know each other."

"Yes, you know how far you can go without getting in trouble."

"I didn't have to get used to a different teacher and their way of teaching."

"You don't feel as pressured the first couple of weeks because

you know the teachers."

"Yes, you are not scared of your teachers."

"They know how to handle us because they know us."

"I think that looping lets us know the teachers more, it feels like 7th & 8th grade is just one long year."

Meeting the emotional and interpersonal needs of adolescents is prerequisite to being able to effectively teach them (Stevenson, 1992). Most of the looping students believed that they knew at least one teacher that they could talk to about personal issues. Most students believed they knew a teacher who would listen to them and help guide them.

"I feel that I can talk to any of my teachers."

"I feel really close to Mrs. K."

"I feel comfortable around them."

"I feel that I could talk to Mrs. T about issues because I know her well and she seems understanding."

"Mrs. L., I can trust her and she gives people her opinion and shares her personal issues, too."

"Yes, Mrs. K because I see her the most and she has kids so she would be the most experienced."

With the developmental changes that adolescents experience in this transitional stage of their life, a sense of belonging and feeling valued in a group was perceived as essential to their success in middle school.

Academic Accountability. The theme of achievement was related through these responses as most students believed that the looping teachers acknowledged and recognized their academic strengths over two years. When asked if they thought that the teachers knew their strengths here are some of their thoughts:

"I know they recognize my strengths because they know who I am."

"They know me as a kid and person not just a student."
"They do most of the time, I deserve what I get."
"A couple of them do because of looping."
"Yes, because they have worked with us for two years."
"Yes, because they have complimented me on them."
"Yes, they see my grades."
"They know us and our expectations.""
"They like to talk to you about your strengths."

The looping arrangement of two years provided more time than the non-looping teachers to work proactively with students and tailor instruction targeting their capabilities to reach their fullest potential. Student's responded to this idea with the following comments:

"They've seen my capabilities for the past year and a half."
"They were great; it's much easier starting with teachers who know you and your capabilities."
"My teachers have been able to see and know what my capabilities are."
"They know us well and know our work."
"Yes, because they get to study us for two years."
"They usually try to bring out the best of my strengths."
"They tell me I know I can do better."
"They started teaching right where they left off."
"It allows them to be more in-depth."
"Yes, because they write good comments on my report card."
"They are not afraid to ask me to take on extra work."
"They know my strengths better than I do!"
"The fact that I didn't have to work up to my teacher's standards because I was already there, I knew what the teachers expected."
"Because they know us and know what we are capable of, they advanced it."
"They put me in more challenging classes for 8th grade as well as recommendations for high school."
"If I slack off, they take off points and tell me it wasn't to my ability."

For the students (approximately 10% of those students who did not prefer looping) who did not feel they had developed a relationship with the team of teachers, their responses reflect a disconnection of acceptance. They express that the teachers do not understand their academic potential as a student.

"Sometimes I feel that the teachers think I'm something I'm not and they don't know my strengths."
"I'm not challenged enough to use my strengths."
"They think that you are the same from the previous year."

According to these findings, a few of these students also reflect that their grades did not change through the looping process when asked if grades were better the second year.

"No, because our papers are only recognized as a grade and not a level of imagination."
"All hear from one teacher is my downsides, I'd like some confidence."
"No, I think they are worse because I guess I'm getting lazier, that's what they say."
"It's just that the homework is harder."
"They are the same, I have maintained."

Despite these few responses of discourse, the majority of students surveyed affirm that their grades were better during the second year of looping. Most of the comments about their grades were associated with having a better self-understanding of academic expectations and taking the necessary personal steps to make improvements.

"My grades are better because I've grown to know how well they want to expect things to be."
"Yes, I'm glad that you asked that question. I set goals for myself –

I wanted to get a 4.0 and I did!"

"My grades are kind of better because I study more."

"They are definitely getting better because I understand and do my homework."

"My grades are better because I tried harder and like school better."

"They are better because I know what the teachers want from me."

"I have paid more attention this year."

"I am used to the teacher's expectations now."

"Grades are better this year because the teachers know my work and what grades I should deserve."

"Teachers know me better and they know what I can do and they try to make me do better."

"Looping is harder since they know you more."

While the scope of this research did not address the impact of student achievement of looping students as compared to non-looping students, analysis of report cards and grade point averages indicate that eleven of the twelve looping students maintained or improved their grade point averages in a range from .08 to .57 during the looping cycle. The one student who did not show improvement had a slight decline. However, she was absent thirty days during the school year which most likely was a contributing factor to her diminished level of achievement.

The theme of academic accountability was resonated by the majority of looping students. They confirm that teachers better understood their learning capabilities as more time was provided for teachers to work with students which resulted in overall improvement of study skills and grades.

Sustained relationships with teachers. Most looping students expressed having a close relationship with their teachers. Acknowledging feelings of trust with their teachers, knowing they could approach them, and describing their relations as friendly was exemplified by 80% of the looping participants. Additionally, for these looping

students, developing relationships with their teachers created opportunities for student learning. Close relationships were described by the following responses:

"I think that our team of teachers had a good relationship with the students who have looped because the teachers know more about the students."

"We all know each other, like a huge family."

"They understand me better and how my learning process is."

"The teachers and I trust each other and the teachers have seemed to notice more about me."

"We're not afraid to ask questions and we feel a lot more comfortable around them."

"The more I got to know them the better the relationship."

"My teachers help me a lot as I have problems with my work."

"It's gone very well for the most part, they know you so they respect you."

"We have good relationships they know lots about you."

"They're like friends in a way."

"It's very good, I feel comfortable talking with them and asking for help."

"I think my relationship with the teachers is a lot better than it would be with new ones."

"I have good relationships, they like me, I like them."

"My relationship with my teachers is that they trust me."

Through this middle school looping arrangement, students had come to know their teachers well. Because of the sustained relationships most felt very comfortable talking with them about personal issues. When asked if they could talk to teachers about personal issues, here is how some of the students responded:

"I could tell my prime time teacher anything."

"I would talk with Mrs. L. she's upbeat, sweet, "kiddish" very cool, and nice."

"It's been good, they understand you and help you out with problems."

"Yes, I would talk with Mrs. T. as she has good advice and I trust her."

"Mrs. T she is a respectful person to talk to."

"I do feel comfortable talking to them, I know them and I trust them. I would talk to all of them."

"We've had our disagreements but I get along with them most of the time."

"I feel most comfortable talking with Ms. S. because she knows me the most."

"Yes, I would tell them about bullies and people that are picking on my friends."

"I would tell Mrs. J as she understands me."

"I would chose to speak with any of them, it wouldn't really matter."

"I think I could talk to Mr. J about stuff because I like him."

"Yes, I would. They understand about middle school problems."

For those students who had difficulty developing close relationships with the looping teachers they cite personal reasons and lack of comfort in not talking with their teachers. Some of their responses are as follows:

"I don't normally talk with teachers about my problems with other people."

"I don't share personal issues."

"I don't like sharing my feelings with anyone but my mom."

"I don't think I have a good one (relationship) with any of my teachers, they are good teachers."

"I have not really had a relationship which sounds strange because I have been taught be them for two years."

"I think they liked us a lot more last year."

"I don't like having the same teachers for 2 years."

"I don't think I could talk with any of my teachers, it's none of their business."

"It isn't good because I tell them exactly what I think and some respect it and some hate it."

"They tell me what to do and they don't say anything good."

"I really don't have one."

"A teacher isn't someone who needs to know your life outside of school in my opinion."

"I hold back everything because they would go and tell someone and put me in some program."

"I hold things back about my family and my past bad experiences."
"Not really. I don't like talking to teachers because they look at every thing from a different point of view."

Beyond the lack of a close personal relationship with their teachers, some of the students believe that their teachers may have lost some of their objectivity when dealing with them during the second year of looping. A few students thought they were stereotyped if they had previous problems with the teachers during the first year. Here are their perceptions:

"Teachers don't judge your kids."
"They didn't give me a second chance."
"This is the first time I've had to worry about failing a class."
"They were nice at first but then they changed."
"I didn't like it because the teachers think that if you were bad last year, you're still bad this year."
"I didn't like it at first because they can judge you from last year."
"I thought it was weird because it felt like I had failed 7th grade."
"I don't like having the same teacher for two years."
"Teachers should expect something new from the students, not assume they know you because of last year's grade."

Sustained relationships with students. Through the organization of looping, looping teachers were afforded more opportunities to learn about the academic and personal needs of their students. Afforded opportunities also held true for the looping students in developing relationships with their peers on the looping team. Almost every student in this study (including those with differing discourse) acknowledged they learned more about each other and developed friendships through the looping arrangement.

"I love the relationships with my classmates, no complaints here."

"They have strengthened over the school years."

"We know each other and we don't have to make new friends each year."

"We know how to approach certain people better, we knew them, and more about them."

"It was alright, we know each other more."

"We all know each other it's kind of like one big family."

"I have made more friends because we have been in the same environment."

"My friendship with my friends is better than last year, because I know them better."

"We're closer than ever."

"I went through a dramatic change with my life last year, I have better friends now and don't get in a lot of trouble."

"I knew everybody better than last year and get along with them better."

"They are stronger than ever."

"I know them well and I don't hate anyone and I don't think that they hate me."

"You can start a conversation with anyone even if they are not your closest friend."

"You are friends with everyone. You are closer than you were last year."

"I know everyone, I may not like all of them, but we do know everyone so it isn't awkward when working in groups."

"My classmates are awesome. They like me and I like them. we all usually get along."

"It's great, I have more time to know people, I made friends a lot more after being in class with them for two years."

"It gets more fun the second year because you know everyone."

"Relationships have gotten stronger and I have more friends."

"You get the chance to do projects with your friends and have more to talk about."

"I have made some great friendships by looping."

"One of the better things about looping- friendships."

"I have so many friends. Our friendships grow strong over the two years."

Positive peer relations and the need for affiliation to a valued group build capacity in young adolescents. Belonging to a supportive web of relationships may provide motivation to learn and an affirmation that they can be successful in school (Goodenow, 1993).

Alternative Perspectives. The majority of students indicated that they liked the looping arrangement as indicated by their shared responses about knowing teachers well and understanding their academic and behavioral expectations. Most of the students had developed a close relationship with the looping teachers creating a high level of trust and comfort in working with their teachers. However, for the 39 students who had not made a personal or academic connection the theme of alternative perspectives was most resonant and divergent as they share their differing responses:

"I think some students could understand better from maybe a different teacher."

"Don't loop, meet new teachers."

"You need to experience different teachers."

"It just feels like a longer school year – keep the schedules the same for each student."

"Have less rules."

"I think the class is more interesting with different teachers."

"We get no new experiences, same scenery, we do not get to enjoy other learning styles."

"It felt just like last year. I didn't want to loop because I wanted to have people from the other team in my classes."

"It seemed like I was in 7th grade."

"I didn't like it because it doesn't give you the opportunity to meet new people and experience different teaching you may like more."

"It got old after the first week of school."

"I think it's bad because sometimes you get a teacher you don't like."

"You don't get to experience how other teachers teach."

"I didn't have the thrill of new teachers, so it was like getting back into a routine after a long vacation."

"I didn't think it was fair getting the same teachers again."

"I wanted to have some of the teachers on the other team because they do more activities."

"I don't think having the same teachers has been good for me – I don't get a chance to meet new kids or teachers."

"They all know you so it's hard to make friends."

"I liked people better from the other team."

"It really depends if you like your teachers or not."

Associated with this theme of alternative perspectives is the notion that adolescents are part of a democratic society and should be offered opportunities for major involvement in their curriculum, how they learn, and choices in their learning (Beane, 1990). While most students enjoyed the looping process and recommended it for future classes other suggestions about looping involve choices and change.

"I would have a survey of people who wanted to loop and those who didn't."

"Let the student decide if they want to loop or not."

"Mix around the teachers."

"Choosing the teachers you want to loop with."

"Give a chance to be with all of the teachers on the looping team that you didn't have the last time."

"Make sure you liked your team last year."

According to the majority of the student voices from the surveys, the middle school students have indicated there is a personal bond and relationship with their team of teachers. Most students felt they could approach their looping teachers and talk with

them about serious problems. For most, looping had reduced anxiety about starting a new school year and academically, according to those students, their teachers understand their academic strengths and areas of improvement. Almost all of the students indicated that if given a choice to loop with their teachers they would make that choice. The theme of alternative perspectives was the most dominant concern for a few students who indicated that meeting new teachers and friends was their preference instead of looping.

Videotaped looping classrooms

The third methodology utilized to gain access and learn more about looping during the second year was video taping looping classrooms. This methodology was chosen primarily to study the first days of school and observe other looping classes throughout the school year to gain a better understanding of the looping environment. One teacher from each team provided access to videotape their classes at the beginning of the school year and then several times throughout the school year. Approximately forty hours of class time was recorded using one teacher from each of the looping teams. This was one of the most challenging aspects of data collection due to some technical difficulties due to failed recordings or damaged tapes.

I reviewed the videotapes several times in an attempt to observe behavior of the students, the looping teachers, and the interactions of both groups during the class. I transcribed the conversations that took place during the classes for authenticity purposes.

First day observations from the tapes of looping classrooms show students and teachers interacting in a very positive manner. The atmosphere of the classroom environment seemed friendly and inviting. The looping teachers knew each student and said their name as they entered the classroom. Students were socially interacting with

one another in a casual way and did not appear to be nervous or anxious about this first day of school. When the teacher from Team A asked her students about their thoughts on the first day, several students replied,

"It was fine, no problem."
"I was kinda anxious."
"We weren't nervous, easy."

Students were on task during the first day lessons and seemed relaxed. There seemed to be much excitement and anticipation about what field trips were going to be scheduled and other activities. Questions were freely asked and answered relating about what they would be doing this year. One of the looping teachers shared her news of her pregnancy with the class, but they already knew. They were talking about it like one would discuss at the dinner table. The students were very excited for her and wanted to know when she was due, etc. They were quickly disappointed when they found out she would be leaving before spring break to have the baby.

The first class for the looping teacher from Team A was reading. Her conversation went like this:

> "Everybody else in the school is doing this all these 'let me learn your names" kinda of stuff and we don't have to worry about this, other than that for this 8th grade group, my favorite, favorite part about teaching 8th grade is reading. I love all of the books that we do for reading in 8th grade, they're really good...I think that you're going to like all of them. We do a few different things because we have to do a lot of writing in 8th grade especially in Language Arts. We'll be showing some good up to date movies and we're going to learn how to write and respond to watching the movie as well as read novels and short stories. I think even if you've never enjoyed reading before at least you'll at least like the books

for this course. You know how I work as far as book reports go at least most of you do. My expectations of being very neat are important, you know that. I'll explain everything as I go, there should be no surprises. This is going to be so great!"

This teacher was setting the stage for learning in her classroom based upon last year's expectations. She also provided some ideas on what was going to be covered and related those appealed to the students with her enthusiasm for the class and what they were going to do. She was very concerned about their thoughts and shared that with them. A very conversational approach on their level, which kept their attention.

Opening day for the looping teacher for Team B was similar as he explains his expectations on how the 8th grade year is going to go:

> "This is my 14th year. The 14th year that I have had 8th graders. I'm here because I like it. So don't ever think that I don't. My point is that we can have a lot of fun during this 8th grade school year, if you are mature, act like young ladies and gentleman, young adults, we can have a lot of fun, there will be times when we'll need to be serious, when I need to get information out to you when you need to pay attention. There will be times like now, times when we can have a good time, laugh, joke around, but we always have to be able to pull things back and say "OK", now it's time to learn"

He set the stage for his students by appealing to their sense of self-identity emphasizing maturity, being a good role model for others and exhibiting responsibility. He goes on to promote learning and their role in school,

> "The number one reason why you're here is for you guys to learn and you all have tremendous potential. And, I enjoy watching the potential come out, seeing you grow, seeing you learn, and seeing you figure things out. One of the nice things about looping is having you guys last year and this year, is that I get you

for two years and I can see a tremendous growth over time that many of you have. You know, I've remarked to a couple of you already it's like "wow," you've really grown since last year. I remember when you came in as 7th graders. It's very rewarding to me to be able to spend the time with you.

Both looping teachers reinforced rules and expectations and made several references to situations and activities from last year. Both teachers also talked about extended learning activities and upcoming ideas for field trips. Both teachers had a very conversational approach with their students and students were relaxed and ready to get started. Even though there may have been much anticipation about starting the new school year there was little apparent anxiety or nervousness.

The emergent themes from the student interviews and surveys were very apparent except for the theme of alternative perspectives. The interviewed students seemed to be accepting of the looping arrangement, as I did not hear any negative comments about not wanting to be on the looping team or behavior from the students that would indicate negative body language or emotions of unhappiness. Perhaps, those students who expressed not having a choice to loop had accepted their situation for the year due to parent influence or administrative disapproval of the request to be transferred to the other team. Another thought is that the surveys were given towards the end of the 8th grade year and maybe relationships with teacher deteriorated throughout the course of the school year that caused this discontent.

Transition to 8th grade did not seem a concern for most students videotaped as 113 students of a possible 117 students from Team A and 130 students out of a possible 138 from Team B had looped from 7th grade, knew their teachers, and spent little time with orientation or "getting to know you" activities. Also, the students affirmed this idea of smooth transition on their surveys when they shared responses that the first couple of days were fun and they liked the fact that they didn't have to "play" the name game.

Videotapes also reveal the students were very interactive and involved with each other during the first couple of days. Due to increased enrollment, Team B had 15 new students to their looping team. Those students were welcomed by the teacher and assigned a "buddy" to help them with their schedule and locker.

Teaching and learning seemed to begin the first day of school. One student asked, "Are we going to have homework today?" As indicated by both teachers and students, everyone was expected to start school with higher standards of accountability because of the looping arrangement. Looping teachers developed a two-year curriculum plan in which to best meet the needs of their particular group of students. Goals for instruction were developed and sequencing decisions were made by the looping teams to bridge the gap of curriculum not covered the first year. The looping teams were organized to promote a more consistent approach to teaching and learning, to ease transitions between grade levels, and to promote positive relationships with students and parents. I will discuss the strategic planning of curriculum in more detail from the teacher perspective in the next section.

It was interesting to note that this notion of "familiarity and contempt" was a first day concern (as previously mentioned by a few of the other looping teachers) as he shared his concerns with his class,

> "One thing that will happen, one thing that is a possibility of happening, is you guys get too comfortable with me. And, if you forget that you know we're here to learn and if that you guys need to act like young adults then sometimes problems arise. So hopefully that won't happen. You need to keep in mind you are here to learn. When it's time to learn and I say it's time to settle down then that really means you need to settle down. You need to pay attention and remember why we're here. We're here to learn but we can have fun while we're doing it. OK? I

can safely say that I think that's how all your teachers feel. So, if you want to have fun, the main thing to remember is that when it's time to learn you need to buckle down, you need to listen."

For this looping teacher, if the students could keep this idea in perspective then familiarity would not get in the way of learning and effect their relationship.

In conclusion, according to the data collected from student interviews and surveys, the students believed that they developed close personal relationships with their teachers. Positive relationships were also evident through the videotapes as for most students interactions were friendly and students actively participated in class activities. The looping teachers seemed to be very inclusive as they talked about the academic activities for the school year as well as providing choices for students in their learning.

Teachers

The second group of participants from this middle school looping study was the two teams of teachers. Team A had four teachers on their team and Team B has five teachers. I conducted two focus group interviews for each team during the 8th grade year– one interview was conducted in October of each respective school year and the other interview during the second semester of the 8th grade year. Teachers were asked a set of questions as outlined in the Appendix D. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed to analyze the teacher's responses. The other method of data collection utilized was an end of the year teacher survey completed individually by each teacher on the team. The survey was conducted to afford teachers another opportunity to share personal feelings and thoughts about looping on an individual basis. I was hoping that if they were uncomfortable talking about issues or concerns about looping in the team

interview perhaps, they would be more forthcoming with their responses on an individual survey. I also collected and reviewed other artifacts such as: email responses from teachers, notes from parents to teachers, and personal comments collected through field notes.

Focus team interviews and Open-ended surveys. A total of nine teachers were interviewed and given surveys for this aspect of data collection. Team A had been together for at least five years and were seasoned professionals with experience ranging from seven to eighteen years in working with middle school adolescents. This was their second cycle of looping. Team B had two experienced looping teachers who had worked together in their last looping cycle however, three new teachers were added to this team due to the reconfiguration of staff due to increased enrollment. One teacher from Team A (due to a transfer) and three teachers from Team B were new to the looping team and to the middle school community.

Each teacher was responsible for working with students only assigned to their team which was approximately 117 students for Team A and 123 students for Team B. All teachers had individual planning time and team meeting time built into their daily schedules. As a team they were also responsible for teaching an "advisory" class to address the interpersonal and socio-emotional needs of their students and to provide enrichment activities to their established curriculum. The teachers had autonomy in determining their teaching assignment and collaborated with their team to make those decisions.

The interviews were conducted on site at the middle school during team planning time. The teachers were very responsive and open to working with me on this study. For six out of the nine teachers I had been their supervising Principal. As stated previously, I had established a former positive working relationship with the teams of

teachers and they too were invested in this process as I shared the data with them throughout the study.

The surveys were emailed to teachers at the end of the second semester and given a two-week period in which to reply. Teachers were given an opportunity to add any comments or suggestions to the survey if they felt inclined to.

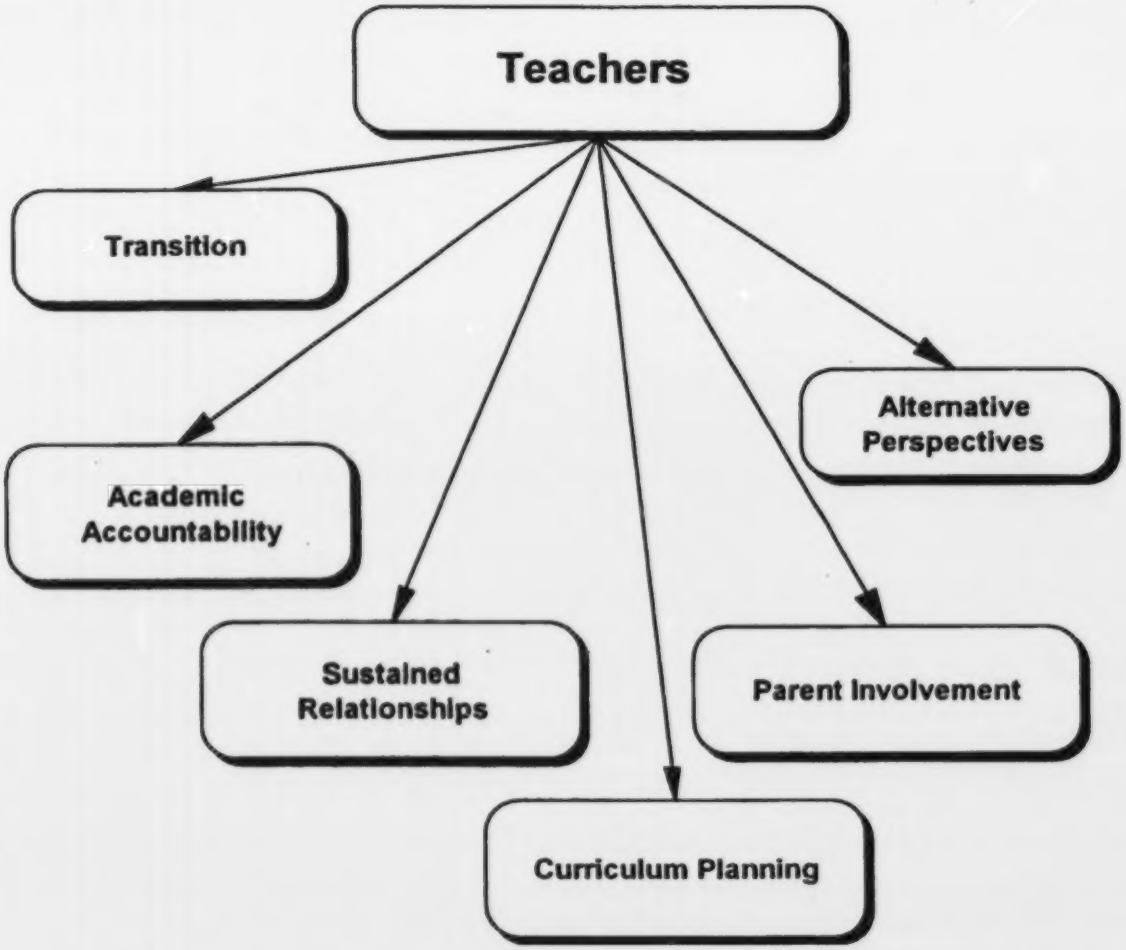
The themes that emerged from this particular aspect of data collection are similar to ones that were identified for the students. The themes of transition, sustained relationships with students, academic accountability and alternative perspectives were common threads expressed by the teachers. Additionally, due to the nature of teaching, other themes were developed related to the role of being a teacher in the looping arrangement. Those "teaching" themes include: curriculum planning and parent involvement. I will describe each of thematic insights as learned from the looping teachers in this study. (See Table 3 as outlined on the proceeding page).

Transition. The beginning of each school year provides the opportunity for teachers to establish a firm foundation for learning and behavior. The tone or climate that a teacher establishes at the beginning of the year is a critical success factor for learning and classroom management for the rest of the school year. Effective transition practices also establish a framework for extended connections and a climate for security and success (Elias, 2001). The looping teachers from this study enjoyed making the second year transition that occurs with looping. As one teacher indicates,

> "I loved the beginning of the year, when you loop because you know them all already. It's so much easier. You're not trying to remember their names and you can talk to them about what they've been doing, instantly relate to them."

Another comments, "We were looking forward to the beginning of the year. We jumped right in, we can't afford to waste any time." Another reiterates, "beginning the second year is the best past of looping, the most positive, it's so much easier the first day when

Table 3 – Teacher Themes – Middle School Looping Case Study



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you already know them all. The kids are so good!" Most of the teachers agreed with their students when reflecting about the beginning of the 8th grade year. Looping students were not nervous about starting school, there was a level of trust including a sense of comfort that had been established, and the students were excited about starting the year because they knew their teachers.

Routines were familiar and both students and teachers understood the expectations. Some of the looping teachers believe that they have the opportunity to jump right in to teaching and start the first day. "You know the students don't want to jump in right away, but how can we waste the first three days?"

Another aspect of transition dealt with new students who were placed on the looping team in mid-year of 7th grade. Teachers were challenged in how to incorporate new students to an established group. One teacher talks about David a new student to the middle school and how she assisted him in making the transition to the looping team as an 8th grader.

> "It's David for me because he started out last year moving in and all, his work was really sloppy. Now he's made the conscious effort to turn in good quality work, making it look decent. His handwriting is still very suspect, but I mean that's him. He has made such a huge effort in terms of neatness, being prepared, getting good quality work done and consistent."

Academic Accountability. The looping teachers have learned about their students' academic ability and potential primarily from their experiences with them in the 7th grade year. The theme of accountability is prevalent as not only do the students understand teacher expectations for homework completion, the looping teachers know the quality of work that students are capable of doing and do not accept anything less

than that standard. Students are held to a consistent level of accountability according to their potential as determined by their teachers using achievement tests and grades. This also holds true for behavior. Students who did not adhere to high academic and behavioral standards were not successful on the looping team. In reference to one student, lack of responsibility has been a frustration for teachers,

> "He's an equal opportunity aggravator. We're so frustrated with him that it's hard to be positive. At least we did know his good side, but I think with some kids they're going to be beat down for a whole year because they choose not to change their behaviors."

This particular student's lack of accountability over the first year of looping led to a change of teams for the following school year. While looping provides many opportunities for teachers to work with student's learning and behavioral needs, it apparently has some limitations when behaviors are not changed. As one teacher indicates, "Some of the students became too comfortable with us and "tuned us out." Both teams agreed that one of the limitations of looping is familiarity especially when students view their relationship with teachers as more of a "friend" instead of a teacher.

For Team A, effort was associated with accountability. Teachers knowing and understanding their students' ability levels has enabled them to challenge their students in many ways.

> "Jeremy's reading level was low, but he makes a solid effort to get everything in, on time, done to the best of what he's been given in terms of reading level. He know that if he does everything for me, if he does all of this, the worst he's going to get is probably a B or something."

Higher expectations was a common thread in these looping discussions about accountability and did not necessarily mean that grades were the sole determining factor.

"The improvement comes in this way, I am able to do higher level thinking "stuff." If it is grade improvement from a C to a B, I do not measure it that way. If they hold their grade through the year with more "thinking stuff" that to me shows improvement."

One of the looping teams believed that students would finally give in to their demands for accountability.

"We figured out different ways to get through to the students who didn't do any work. It didn't take us an entire quarter to figure out who they were so we were on them right away. I think they also just got bored with us nagging on them all of the time to work to their potential."

Also, interesting to point out, in my administrative experience in working with the looping teams, they did not refer as many students to the office for discipline reasons as compared to the non-looping teams. From my experience as administrator, the looping teams referred less than 25 different students to the office for the entire year out of 110 students. There were several non-looping students that individually had many referrals over the course of the year. Further insights from the research indicate consistent rules and expectations played a vital role in the establishment of discipline and consequences served by those looping students. Most importantly, the teachers had made a commitment to a long-term relationship with their students so there was more investment in problem solving and resolving conflict. Teachers had more background information on each looping student to better ascertain the intervention that would be needed and most appropriate. Finally, when one teacher was asked if looping was beneficial to his students, this was his response, "During the looping process I felt the benefits were not apparent. Once I completed the process, I was able to see the impact on students more clearly. I had several positive relationships because of the time we spent together." For

some looping teachers, developing a long-term relationship helped them to better understand their impact on students.

Sustained relationships. I also learned that the teachers were not as nervous or anxious in wondering what students they would have on the looping team because they knew their students and they knew what to expect from them. This was evident by their conversations about how they approached the first couple days of school. Team A had the students write a letter to each teacher telling them about their summer. Since writing across the curriculum had become a focus for this team, the teachers utilized this activity to gain new information about their students. They needed to know what interpersonal types of issues had occurred over the past couple of months and what the students hoped to accomplish in their 8th grade year. Since having a positive relationship with their students was a priority, this group of teachers wanted to provide students an opportunity to share their concerns, suggest ideas for field trips or activities, and most importantly, to let the students know they valued their opinion.

Throughout their experiences with the students, the teachers reflect upon the developed sense of trust with their students.

> "It seems to be more family, the understanding, they know our way of doing things, they have trust levels. I get the feeling that certain students and I have a very good rapport. You know, trust is made up of a lot of little things and being consistent with these things and seeing us this year, they understand that much greater. It's that trust level, family trust level coming out."

Communication seems to happen a lot sooner and is more consistent with the looping students than in the traditional arrangement. Teachers contend that looping organizes relationships for learning as reinforced by the looping teachers who talk about their students who have made a lot of progress. One teacher, reflects about Melissa.

"Melissa is very smart and I always knew that. I think she has socially and academically improved. I made sure she was in my homeroom, reading, language arts, and math. She needed a consistent person for her. So, with kids like her you just praise them for what they're doing and for making good decisions."

Relationships are the essence of looping practice. All of the looping teachers enjoyed learning more about their students and their potential. One teacher elaborates,

"Overall, I really enjoyed the looping process. I was able to finally provide my students with the type of role model that I thought they needed. The relationships that I developed with my students were much more meaningful and powerful than the ones in the past."

One teacher who did not volunteer to loop with his students, but did so when asked by the administration shares this comment:

"I did not always enjoy looping although I did see some improvements. The students knew me, and I knew them better. It was fun seeing many of them mature both emotionally and academically. I would do this again, if asked. My biggest problem was my attitude toward the two different curriculums rather than working with the students."

This comment leads into our next discussion about curriculum and the decisions that are necessary when working with students over a period of two years in the context of looping.

Curriculum planning. Curriculum planning and development for adolescents should be based upon their unique developmental needs, their relation to the world around them, and their prospects to become a viable citizen in this world (Beane,1993). With Team A, teachers shared the responsibility of teaching a shared subject and their focus was writing across the curriculum. They used team planning and in-service time to

discuss curriculum and plan units of study. Opportunities for research projects became integrated studies across the content areas. Team A developed different performance assessments for each of the projects some of which included common rubrics for grading. Through the looping process, this particular group of teachers was able to identify a common student deficiency and plan curricular efforts in a concerted manner to correct it. As one teacher put it, "It was a natural evolution of things." Her colleague adds, "It works well with looping because you get to see how they improve and how much better they get. And they are getting better." Teachers reflect seeing grades improve over time as well as quality of work. One teacher reflects, "Students demonstrated academic and social progress. Deficits were targeted and addressed. In general, there was observable progress made."

Team B was organized in a more traditional schedule where each teacher was responsible for teaching a specific content area. Three teachers on Team B were new to the middle school philosophy and the looping process. Two of the five teachers had looped previously. This was problematic in that over the course of two years, these teachers were expected to coordinate instruction for students and had not previously taught the district's curriculum for both 7th and 8th grade. During one of the focus team interviews one teacher responds, "Interdisciplinary units have not been a focus. Many of us are still trying to learn the curriculum." However, the team shared that they were beginning to integrate reading, writing, and social studies to rectify this issue. One area which seemed to allow more autonomy for planning as compared to the standards based curriculum was the advisory class. The team planned a mini-Olympics, a unit on study skills, goal setting, and literature readings to assist students with needs addressed by the team.

Teachers cited an advantage in knowing what the students had learned the year before. Activities were extended in the areas that needed to be reinforced and there

was minimal overlap in units due to this knowledge. As one teacher indicates, "It's refining things all of the time." Additionally, due to sustained relationships over two years, the teachers felt that their discussions with students were more meaningful. "I think because we know them pretty well you can have better discussions and get more down to the point." Another teacher adds,

> "Improvement was easy to see, due to the fact that I know what to expect from all of my students. As a math teacher I was able to move farther in the curriculum than I ever had been able to before."

At this particular middle school portfolios were developed for all 8th grade students. These portfolios were primarily used for student-led conferences which occurred during the second semester. Specific to learning, the looping teams indicate that the portfolios work well with the student led conferences. Students would request to work on their portfolios, which the teams viewed as a motivation and positive. Additionally, current events (a new activity) for Team A occurred every Friday with the goal to better meet the needs of their students through relevant world events. One teacher shares, "there's too much stuff to teach in all the classes so it's nice to share and discuss current events."

Planning new activities was a priority for both looping teams. One teacher shares, "We try to come up with new things and we're trying not to repeat anything that we've done before with this group." This was especially evident in the advisory class that Team A planned and implemented. "New ideas, that's our main goal. We want them to like what the activity is and have those somewhat academically related, but sometimes just socially related because it's good just to enjoy being here. I think we have a good mix." For Team B, the schedule changed so that students in band and choir did not have an advisory class. This group focused on the integration of reading,

writing, and social studies as previously mentioned to provide students with this learning opportunity.

Team A identified harassment and teasing as a concern with some of their students. This team conducted several lessons about these issues and conducted their own student survey to gather information about this type of behavior on their team.

> "We started on that right away the second year because they know that we don't tolerate it. There are kids that come to us and told us that so and so is picking on me. So, we immediately called those kids in. It was the second week of school, you know, rather than waiting to find out who gets picked on and who already is picked on, or who does the picking on....as a group they've been much better. The kid who came to talk about it knew he could, he knew to come to somebody, because he knew that he could come right away and he didn't have to worry about telling us."

The looping teams engaged in strategic planning of curriculum for their students. They planned interdisciplinary units of study skills, current events, advisory activities based upon the needs expressed by the students, and developed a better scope and sequence of content area units. Because of the sustained relationships, knowledge of academic strengths including areas of improvements, the planning of interdisciplinary units, projects, and other extended activities provided direction for their instruction.

Parent Involvement. Looping also provided the opportunity for parents to build and develop relationships with the team of teachers. Both looping teams expressed that some of the parents knew them very well despite that small percentage of parents who choose not to be involved (as defined by the teachers) in their child's education. Several of the looping teachers viewed parent communication as favorable in the context of looping:

> *"When dealing with parents you can almost be a little bit open and honest*

with them up front, more blunt."

"By 8th grade, parents like students knew team expectations and communication "seemed" more relaxed and routine."

"I felt more comfortable with many of the parents. I also believe that they felt more comfortable with us."

"I felt there was a better trust level when the students reached 8th grade with the parents. People knew what to expect."

These looping teachers believed that their student's parents were engaged and involved with them in their work as professionals. According to Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla (1994, p.1) in their research of parent involvement in schools,

> "When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life. One of the most accurate predictors of student achievement is not income or social status, but the extent to which the student's family creates a home environment that supports learning, promote high expectations for their child's achievement, and how they become involved in their children's education at school and in the community."

One looping teacher adds, "I felt that we did develop good parent relationships. We tried different avenues to help their children become successful."

Another looping teacher raised concerns of frustration in regard to parent involvement during the second year.

> "Our back to school night is always smaller, and conferences, too. If we haven't met a kid's parents in two years, that's ridiculous. We tell the students to talk with their parents, if they've never met us they really should try to come to conferences. So, this has been a focus for us this."

Alternative Perspectives. Limitations to looping were defined by some students and a few looping teachers as not being able to make a personal connection. Some students need a change of scenery according to one looping teacher, "I think there's some kids that just are – whatever it is, their attention span or whatever. They want new things and they get bored with the old things so they just want something different." Another looping teacher adds her thoughts about staying positive,

> "I just don't think it would be good for him to loop because it wouldn't be good for us because we're so frustrated with him that it's hard to be positive. With some kids they're going to be beat down for a whole year because they choose not to change their behaviors."

From the data collected it appears that the ability for both students and teachers to sustain long-term relationships can offer great potential to provide quality learning experiences. Team A teachers experienced a sense of self-efficacy as they planned sequenced curriculum based upon the unique needs of their students. They believed that they had the autonomy to make those academic adjustments and were trusted by the administration to do what was best for their students. Due to several staff changes with Team B, the team was working on their professional relationships at the same time as learning to work with their students. This became more of a priority for them as they developed relationships amongst themselves and gaining experience in working with their students.

Choosing to loop was not necessarily an option for one team of teachers but a situation where they agreed to experience the program. Despite this, one teacher wrote me this thoughtful response,

> "Looping over the past two years has been a learning experience for me. I previously turned in a list of observations and plan to work that into a paper about my experiences. There is something additional that needs to be stated. Even

though I was not in favor of looping, I am glad that I did loop. I would be willing to try it again. Much of my negative experiences were caused by "anti-looping" feelings from other teachers before the experience ever began. Other negative thoughts were caused by knowing the dynamics of our group of students. Students must be carefully chosen for this experience. I have learned much, including the revised 7th grade curriculum, the teaching of history, and how to adjust my teaching style from one grade level to another. It is an experience from which many would benefit. One can get stuck in a "rut" if your teaching assignment never changes. While I still prefer 8th grade, I no longer have any negative feelings about teaching 7th grade. For me, seeing the students mature is a reward in itself. Many of the students have changed. It has taken some of them until now to show that maturity, but it is showing. Others have shown great strides; others have shown no improvement. That, however, is not the fault of looping. After all, some adults never mature either."

Parents

The third group of participants in this middle school looping study was the parents of the students. I began collecting anonymous parent opinions by using a closed-ended survey. I believed this type of survey would reduce the complexity of data collection especially since 240 surveys were sent out to parents from Team A and Team B. Finally, this approach was utilized to promote a high return rate and gain information in which to design follow up questions for the parent in-depth interviews. With the first looping group in the study (Team A), I used a three-response choice for each question. Parents circled either agree, disagree, or unsure to respond to the statements on the survey. I then calculated the percentages of each response for each response choice. A total of 117 surveys were mailed to parents at their home address. Forty-six surveys

were returned for a total of approximately a 39% return rate. The survey is included in Appendix H. Parents also wrote voluntary comments about the looping process and offered suggestions. One parents indicates, "My student enjoyed being with some teachers. The start of the year was somewhat less stressful. I might recommend looping to other middle school parents, but it really depends on the child."

Other parents agreed that their student enjoyed being with the same teachers for two years and that 8th grade was less stressful for them as parents. Most responded that they would choose looping for their middle school student. There was also strong support for looping at the elementary grades 1-5. Table 4 on the preceding page outlines the results of the Team A parent survey.

Results of the first year survey reveal that over two-thirds of the parents believe:

- Looping students better understood expectations of looping teachers
- Looping teachers better understood their student's strengths and needs
- Starting 8th grade was less stressful for their students as compared to 6th & 7th
- Their child enjoyed being with the same classmates over two years
- Looping parents felt more comfortable communicating with teachers in the 8th grade year.

Table 4 – Parent Looping Survey – 2001

Parent Looping Survey- Team A – June 2001	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
My student enjoyed being with the same teachers for 2 years	67%	11%	22%
My student enjoyed being with the same classmates for 2 years	78%	1%	15%
Starting the 8th grade year was less stressful for my student	74%	9%	1%
The 8th grade was less stressful for me as a parent	63%	13%	24%
I had a better understanding of my child's education after 2 years with the same teachers	57%	11%	24%
At the beginning of 8th grade, my student better understood what was expected of him/her	80%	5%	1%
The teachers better understood my student's strengths and needs during the 8th grade year	83%	1%	15%
The summer between the 7th & 8th grade school years was less stressful for my student	48%	14%	22%
I felt more comfortable communicating with the student's teachers during the 8th grade year	70%	15%	15%
If I had to do over, I would choose looping for my child	65%	5%	22%
I would recommend looping to other middle school parents	54%	17%	24%
I support looping at the elementary grades (1-5)	67%	15%	15%
I support looping at the middle school level (6-8)	59%	15%	24%

The second year I used the same survey questions but utilized a Likert-type format to obtain more scaled responses to the statements. The survey is included in Appendix I. My main motivation here was to provide more options to answer the questions. In the first year survey, several parents had selected the "unsure" option to some of the questions. I wondered if that was because they were really unsure of their

opinion or if they needed more latitude in how to answer specific questions, in other words, I believed the three choice response survey was too narrow. The choices on the second year parent looping survey utilized five categories consisting of: strongly agree, agree, unsure, disagree, and strongly disagree. 123 parent surveys were sent to Team B parents. Thirty-five surveys were returned for a rate of 25%. Results from the Team B parent surveys indicate:

- Over 90% believed that their students better understood teacher's expectations
- Approximately 87% indicated that the teachers better understood their student's strengths and academic needs
- Over two-thirds of the parents believed that the beginning of the 8th grade year was less stressful; and that students enjoyed being with their teachers and classmates
- About 70% responded that they were comfortable talking with their student's teachers – (See Table 5 on proceeding page).

While these results were favorable, there were about 40% of the respondents from this survey that were concerned with understanding their student's educational program. And while over 60% supported looping at the elementary and middle school level, 20% would not recommend looping to other middle school parents.

Table 5 – Parent Looping Survey - 2002

Parent Looping Survey – Team B – March 2002	SA	A	U	D	SD
My student enjoyed being with the same teachers for 2 years	20%	51%	6%	17%	6%
My student enjoyed being with the same classmates for 2 years	29%	48%	17%	6%	3%
Starting the 8th grade year was less stressful for my student	32%	54%	6%	6%	3%
The 8th grade was less stressful for me as a parent	20%	57%	17%	3%	3%
I had a better understanding of my child's education after 2 years with the same teachers	28%	31%	20%	20%	-
At the beginning of 8th grade, my student better understood what was expected of him/her	48%	43%	-	6%	3%
The teachers better understood my student's strengths and needs during the 8th grade year	41%	46%	-	6%	6%
The summer between the 7th & 8th grade school years was less stressful for my student	28%	34%	28%	9%	-
I felt more comfortable communicating with the student's teachers during the 8th grade year	32%	38%	14%	14%	-
If I had to do over, I would choose looping for my child	31%	29%	23%	11%	6%
I would recommend looping to other middle school parents	34%	20%	28%	14%	6%
I support looping at the elementary grades (1-5)	28%	32%	17%	17%	9%
I support looping at the middle school level (6-8)	29%	34%	14%	14%	9%

The themes that emerged from this aspect of data collection coincide with the themes identified from the students and teachers. The parent results show that the themes of transition, academic accountability, sustained relationships, and parent involvement were prevalent. However, for 11 (approximately 22%) of the parents that

returned surveys from Team A, and 8 (22%) from Team B, the most resonant theme was the one of alternative perspectives as indicated by the written responses that these parents provided. I will begin with the alternative perspective theme to share those responses and expand upon the other themes thereafter.

Alternative Perspectives. As shared by 19 of the 240 of the parents from the surveys and two of the parents interviewed, the lack of teacher objectivity over a two-year time span was disconcerting for them. These parents thought that having new teachers would provide for more objectivity as compared to looping teachers. One parent relates that looping provides too much familiarity, (similar to what some of the looping teachers expressed) as she indicates, "I think because of adolescence and the teachers familiarity with the student an explosive situation can occur. At this age, change and the unknown is good for the student and the teacher." Another parent relates that teachers perhaps overlook or don't recognize that adolescents do change and need variety.

> "Kids change so much from 6th to 8th grade. I feel new teachers would be better. Seventh grade was big enough of a change mentally and physically. The teachers treated my son the same way in 8th grade as in 7th grade. I feel that that they forgot kids change, too. I feel looping would be better for younger kids that have not matured and need assurance and security."

A few parents cited that their student's friends were on the other team thus limiting the opportunity to interact with the other students on the non-looping team. Some students also referenced this concern as they wished there had been a choice to loop. One parent writes, "Looping is not for everyone. While there really was never any stress with any years, there should be a choice."

Negative relationships and unchanged behavior as voiced by the teachers and parents in this study can also create challenges for looping students. This parent writes,

"A negative relationship in the 7th grade became a negative influence before 8th grade started." The concerning idea of teacher objectivity surfaced again as another parent comments,

> "Looping is a good plan, but only if the first year was good. If the student was with a teacher or teachers that did not understand them and had too many conflicts, then they need to move the student for the second year. Not everyone is going to get along, but even a teacher will find it hard to give a second chance to a student that they had problems with the first year."

Thus, for some parents they believed that different teachers each year would provide students with more opportunities for their student to experience teacher objectivity, especially if a relationship with their teacher had not been developed. They also advocate having a choice in looping as students need exposure to different teaching styles and different students. For these parents and students looping is not an effective placement. Student surveys also revealed these ideas as students indicated their preference to have new teachers each year, placed on a team with more of their friends, and there should be a choice afforded in looping.

Transition. About 80% of the parents surveyed agreed that starting the 8th grade was less stressful for their student. 75% indicated the 8th grade experience was less stressful for them as parents as well. More than three-fourths (78%) indicated that their student enjoyed being with the same classmates for two years and 68% of the parents surveys believed that their students also enjoyed being with their teachers.

Academic Accountability. 80% of the parents indicated that their students better understood rules and expectations in the 8th grade. And according to the surveys, 85% of the parents believed the looping teachers better understood their student's strengths and needs during this time as well. However, one parent was concerned that the

looping team did not have a strong heterogeneous grouping of students as compared to the non-looping team.

> "My student was placed in the team that didn't have excellent students due to her standardized test scores. She felt upset because the classes were too slow. She received Straight A's for three years. Placement of students should not be just according to testing."

In this particular situation, placement of students on the looping team using standardized testing was a factor. However, test scores were only used when determining which students qualified for honors classes since these classes were only offered on the non-looping team. I will discuss this issue further in the next chapter as I talk about placement of students on looping teams.

Sustained relationships. While the majority of students and teachers acknowledge this theme as vital to their work together, 70% of the parents, also felt comfortable communicating with the looping teachers during the 8th grade year. Parents also acknowledge that their students have developed relationships with their looping teachers. Reduced stress, better understanding of their student, and ease in communication were factors to the sustained relationships developed with students, teachers, and parents.

Parent Involvement. Research studies have shown that increased parent involvement contributes to academic success for adolescents (Brough, 1997; Epstein, 1995; Jackson and Davis, 2000). For middle school students especially, parents should not disengage from involvement in their child's education even though the student may not want their parents involved. Due to the many developmental changes and transitions occurring during adolescence parents must work collaboratively with teachers to ensure a successful learning experience. Middle schools need to open more avenues for parents to be involved beyond just bake sales and fund-raising.

Communication must be a priority for all teachers in the middle school setting. Approximately 70% of the parent surveyed indicated that they felt more comfortable communicating with their student's looping teachers and over half of the parents (59%) would choose looping for their child if they had to make that decision. 54% of those parents would also recommend looping to other middle school parents. The looping parents were also involved and worked closely with the teams as chaperones for field trips and in other class activities on a regular basis. While it is unclear that looping specifically contributed to this extended involvement, the surveys indicate that the 8th grade year was less stressful for parents perhaps contributing to their willingness to get more involved with the looping teams.

In-depth Interviews

I originally scheduled twelve parent interviews for this method of data collection. However, one parent decided not to volunteer for the interview, leaving eleven parents for this process. From my challenges in the first year of data collection in trying to find a suitable site to interview (convenient and accessible), I decided to conduct the interviews at the school site during the second year. I scheduled the interviews during a time that parents would be in attendance at the school such as for a school event or parent teacher conferences.

The parents were interviewed to gain more personalized information about their looping experiences with their student and team of teachers. Approximately sixteen questions were developed as follow-up questions from analysis of data from the parent surveys. The parent interview questions are included in Appendix E. I wanted to learn more about their individual experiences as I had learned from the students. Parents volunteered to participate in this aspect of the research. I obtained volunteers from the parent interviews by asking for participants using the parent survey. Parents who were

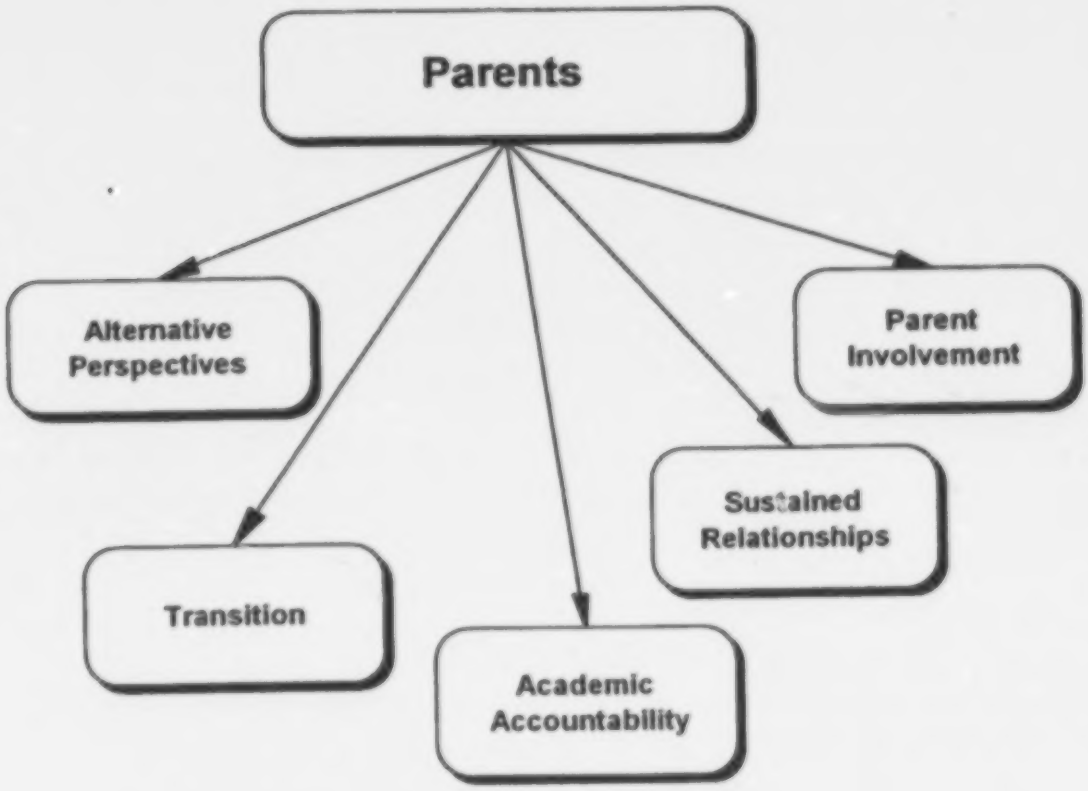
willing to participate in the interviews indicated their interest by providing a phone number in which for me to contact them. I make reference to my findings using the emergent themes as previously discussed and shown in Table 6.

Alternative Perspectives. Two parents voiced a concern about the looping process, one from each respective team. The parent from Team A, questioned the placement of her daughter on the looping team and wondered if she was really challenged enough during her 8th grade year. "I don't think the match for pairing of the teams was fair. Some students perform better in classes than on standardized test." The parent from Team B, also concerned about overall home-school communication, elaborates on her discourse of looping:

> "It has been a concern of mine with the looping especially because, I really his team of teachers, but I think it's been hard for them. Some of the teachers were new at seventh grade and now they're new at eighth grade, so they don't know the curriculum as well. So, I hope that they're pushing him hard enough so he's ready for high school. Knowing my son, he'll be fine because he can adjust to anything, but I worry about the other kids, are they pushing them hard enough?"

For Team B, this was problematic due to the reconfiguration of teams due to the rapid increase in enrollment which forced several teams at the middle school to be reorganized. However, she brings up an excellent point about the curriculum and the need to have staff members that are well versed in middle school content areas. She brings this issue to the forefront due to her experiences as a looping teacher herself in the elementary setting. I will address the staffing issue when I discuss recommendations for looping in the last chapter.

Table 6 – Parent Themes – Middle School Looping Case Study



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In conclusion, both of these parents (who happen to be elementary teachers) believed at this age level, middle school students need new teachers every year. One of the parents indicate,

> "I think these kids, since they're changing so much, they need a new, fresh approach to things; a new fresh teacher to give them an experience and they need to give them a different chance than they've already had. .I really like his team of teachers and it is nice for me, knowing what was expected in seventh grade and going into eighth grade. But I think he would be better off not being in the looping experience."

Transition. For the majority of the interviewed parents, they did not have any concerns about transition for their student going into 8th grade. As one parent elicits, "My daughter likes school and was very excited. She liked her teachers that she looped with." Another parent expands on this idea,

> "My son felt very comfortable and at ease when he started 8th grade. This is because he knew all of his teachers and knew what to expect. This made his attitude very positive towards school. I don't think there was any transition when he started 8th grade because he was looping."

An issue that I did not anticipate surfaced with one parent when asked the question on how to make the middle school better. This parent was concerned about moving 6th graders into the middle school, "If I could change anything, I would not move the 6th graders into this environment so quickly. I don't believe that 6th graders are mature enough to handle everything that middle school brings." For as long as I was an administrator in the district and since the inception of the school in the early 70's, sixth graders were always housed with the 7th and 8th graders at this school. Nevertheless, she felt comfortable expressing her opinion about this issue.

Finally, every parent expressed a positive comment in regard to transition. One parent whose son had looped for the third time in his elementary career responds, "It was very easy for him. He knew what he was getting into and I think he was ready for that social outlet. Another parent reflected about a seamless transition for her son, "It was very easy because he knew all of this teachers. He knew exactly what to expect. Pretty seamless, but he's pretty seamless anyways."

Academic Accountability. There were a few concerns raised in the parent surveys about the grouping of students. A few parents from Team A, perceived that the "smart" kids were on the other team. "All of the smart kids were on the other team and my daughter felt left out. I would change how a student is grouped into the teams, use 6th grade performance to determine placement, not standardized test scores." In contrast to this a parent from Team B responded to the accountability question, "I do believe that they team of teachers knows her potential. She's gotten into the gifted program that they're doing this year. I feel that they are tracking her better than they did in the past."

However, every parent interviewed believed that high expectations were a priority. "Some teachers had high expectations and expected their students to meet them." One of the reasons shared about the benefits of looping deals with teachers understanding the academic needs of their students. "The looping experience was positive – teachers knew their strengths and could use them to gear their lessons." One parent elaborated on the responsiveness of the teachers, "The teachers were very responsive on when we need updated things and how our child is doing in the classroom. We get our normal phone calls when she isn't doing well."

Learning from day one was also reported as a good beginning by several parents. One parent shares this thought in regard to the looping experience,

"It's been very positive. I think it's been great. I like it. I think it's a good concept. Again, academically, I feel like when they started eighth grade, they picked up where they left off. He's the same kid. They knew what to expect and the first five weeks of school wasn't getting to know who the kids are."

When one parent was asked what she liked best about the school, she shared, "My daughter seems to like her teachers. She likes her team a lot this year. She seems to learn a lot and she enjoys school and I think that's important. If they don't enjoy school, they won't continue."

Looping provides the opportunity for extended time to learn and work together for all members of a school community - students, teachers, and parents. The theme of sustained relationships as with the other participants in the study also resonated loud and clear from the parent perspective.

Sustained Relationships. In terms of meeting personal and social needs, the looping teams provided opportunities for this on going affective development. One mother indicates, "Yes, my daughter was organized and well-rounded in her studies – they treated her with respect and she returned the respect." Several parents believed that their student had good relations with their peers as well as with their teachers. "She had more friends on the other team, but she had great relations with her peers." Another parent acknowledges, "I do believe that every opportunity was made for me to get to knew them as a parent." Looping created an easy approach for students to get to know others. "My son has always had good relationships with his peers, and looping put the situation of friends as non-threatening." Social interaction with peers was important for this parent as she shared,

"I like the middle school philosophy and I like that there's a lot of the children to be a little more social and interactive with their friends. I think that makes them more relaxed, able to get through their day better."

For another parent, social growth was a successful indicator of looping,

"My son had just some tremendous growth socially over the past two years, I'd say. I don't know that he has a lot of social needs now. Prior to this, he did need this kind of attention. But now I would say he doesn't have a lot of social needs. He has a strong sense of self."

Parent Involvement. Opportunity to communicate with the looping teachers was comfortable for most of the parents surveyed and interviewed. When asked about contacting teachers, one parents shares this thought, "Yes, I would feel comfortable contacting them, but I didn't need to, but I'm sure they would meet with me. I would probably talk about their expectations for my daughter and if she is meeting their goals." Parents also indicated their student was successful at the middle school because of a team effort with teachers. "I believe we worked as a team – I backed up the teachers and gave help and guidance at home to reinforce their work at school." Another parents adds, "I did like the "team" concept that the school had."

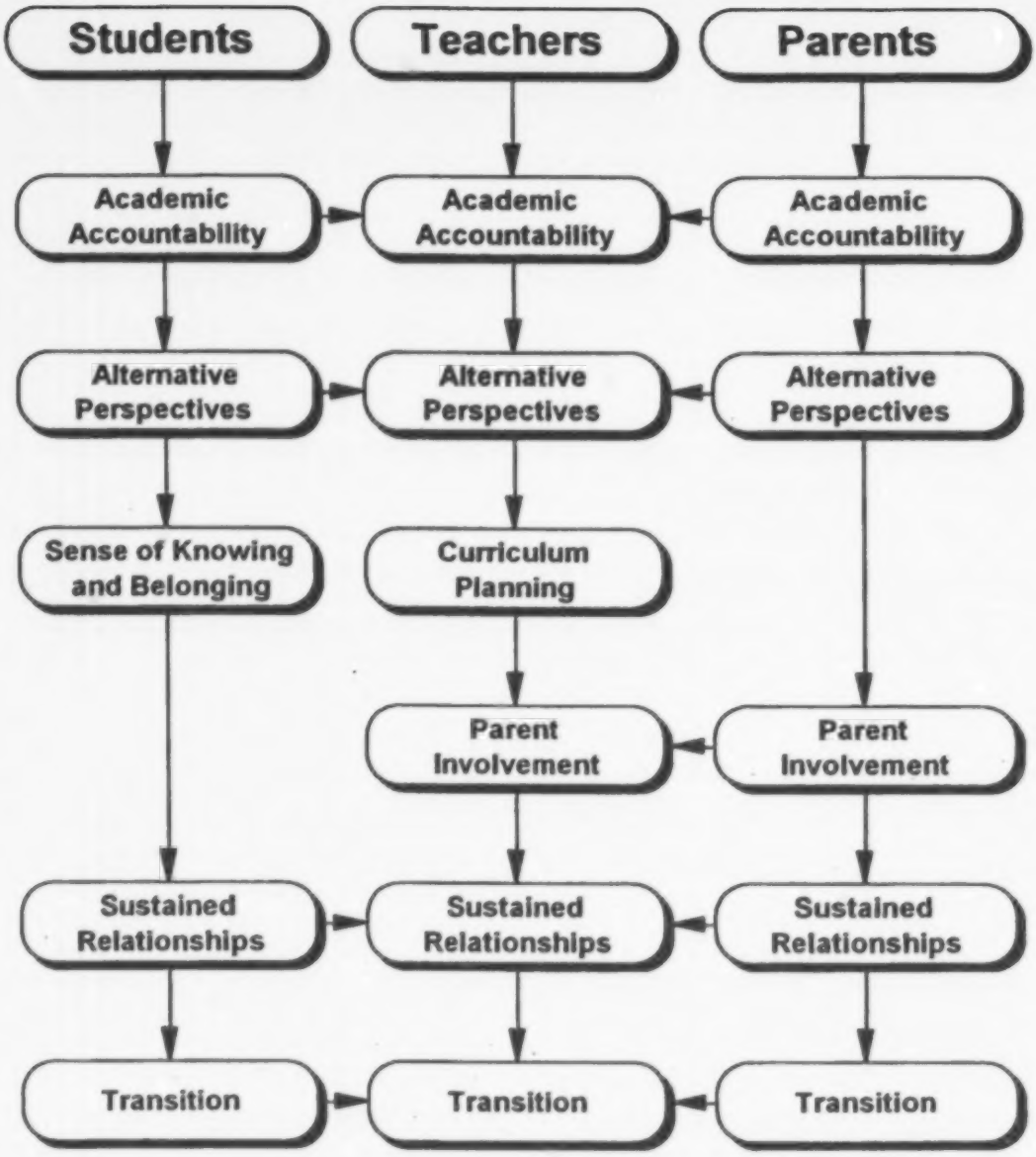
Parent engagement becomes more and more important as students progress from the elementary grades to middle school and then to high school. Looping allows parents more opportunities to work proactively with their students' teachers because there is an investment in a learning relationship. The benefits of parent involvement should not be underestimated as adolescence is such a transitional time for youth. According to Nancy Mizelle, education professor at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia, "Middle school students with long-term relationships with their

teachers develop a stronger sense of self and more confidence in their ability to succeed in high school" (Allen, 2001).

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the data from the participants created a thematic story from each of their perspectives. Looping themes emerged from each study group that intersected with emerged themes from the others. Table 7 outlines each of the themes as identified by the participants on the proceeding page. Some themes resonated more clearly than others, but all were important to understand as I reflected upon their meaning. In Chapter Five, I analyze, interpret the emergent themes, and discuss what I have learned from the looping participants. The chapter continues with comparisons of my results to the studies presented in the literature review. My concluding remarks will include theoretical implications to middle school practice, generalizations of the study, and recommendations for future looping practice.

Table 7 – Emergent Themes of Participants – Middle School Looping Case Study



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Chapter Five

Interpretations

Reflection

It was my challenge as researcher to discover and unearth the meaning and value of looping as told to me by the participants. This qualitative journey took over two years to gather opinions, to learn about the perspectives of looping practice, and analyze the data to weave together thoughts and ideas that portray a cumulative story. Throughout this examination it has been my goal to gain a better understanding and construct meaning of the looping process as seen through different lenses – the student lens; the teacher lens; the parent lens; and researcher's lens. I was also challenged by my own subjectivity throughout this inquiry to discover and learn the intimate details of looping reminding myself about my assumptions and biases as I made connections that were meaningful to me as an educator. As qualitative researcher, Larry Zinsser (1988) states in his edited book, Extraordinary Lives,

> Research is only research. After all the facts have been marshaled, all the documents studied, all the locales visited, all the participants interviewed, what then? What do the facts add up to? What did the life mean? (p. 17-18).

The data collected in this project has resonated into themes informing about looping at the middle school level. Some themes were strongly voiced by all of the participants while others were heard to a lesser degree. These themes collectively illuminate the looping process like a lens of a camera that zooms in and out to gain a different perspective. I have organized this chapter beginning with the questions that guided my study. The questions that guided my study were: 1) How did the looping relationships develop and sustain when middle school students and teachers stayed together for more than one year? 2) To what extent did these looping relationships

impact the context of learning? 3) What were the responses of students, teachers, and parents to the looping experience in this middle school? 4) What consistent themes emerged regarding the experience of looping in this particular middle school? and 5) What relevance does this looping study have to the advocacy of middle school philosophy?

The chapter continues with the emergent themes of looping following with generalizations of the study and the relationship of my study to prior research. The next section explains the theoretical implications of middle school philosophy. And in the final section, I conclude with my recommendations for the future of looping as middle school practice.

The emergent themes created the framework in which to better understand their perspectives about looping practice and address the questions that guided my study. I was able to write and better understand the looping stories after identifying the participant's themes of looping including the relationships of those themes to middle school philosophy.

The Emergent Themes of Looping

Prolonged engagement provided me with the opportunity to immerse myself in this study and reflect on how the data links with the themes that have emerged through the looping process. I discovered the following themes of looping as illuminated by the participants. I list the themes according to my belief of their importance to the looping process:

1) Sustained relationships
2) Sense of knowing and belonging
3) Academic accountability
4) Curriculum planning

5) Transition

6) Parent involvement

7) Alternative perspectives

Sustained relationships. I believe the hallmark of looping is the commitment of teachers, students, and parents to develop and sustain relationships throughout their educational experience for two or more years. These relationships were intentionally developed to promote learning, advocacy for students, and teacher autonomy. Without relationships developed, nurtured, and sustained over time, I believe few of the other themes of looping could have emerged except for *alternative perspectives*. Relationships were the critical success factor in making looping a positive experience for most of the participants. As Robert Finch (1983) so eloquently states,

> True belonging is born of relationships not only to one another but also to a place of shared responsibilities and benefits. We love not so much what we have acquired as what we have made and whom we have made it with (p. 525).

Teacher relationships. The looping relationships in this study were first developed and sustained with the teachers through the process of teaming. Paramount to middle school philosophy is the concept of teaming where teachers work together to meet the unique academic and social needs of their students as well as to increase their effectiveness, enhance their professional development and benefit from the enjoyment of working with others. This structural component was already in place as this school had been functioning as an effective middle school with two teams of teachers at every grade level.

Furthermore, the looping teachers intentionally planned activities in an effort to get to know their students, identify academic goals, and learn more about their personal

interests. For example, Team A gave its students a survey to learn more personal and academic information about its students. To promote sense of community and celebrate the positive relationships amongst the students and teachers, this looping team planned a social event at the beginning of the year by inviting parents and planning recreational activities that the students had voiced an interest in. This event was intentionally planned to reaffirm the priority and significance of the developed relationships in the looping process.

Because of the investment in developing relationships, the looping teams of teachers worked very diligently to handle student discipline problems. The looping teachers took a personal interest in their students. In fact, according to my experience as administrator at the school, the looping teams had fewer referrals to the office for discipline infractions than the non-looping teams. One looping team had 15 students added to its looping group for the 8th grade year. The team agreed that the majority of its discipline problems were with those students new to the looping scene. According to the team, one reason for this was the student's lack of understanding of the rules and expectations. Looping teachers in this study made an investment in their students to promote reinforcement of consistent rules including behavioral expectations.

There were a few concerns mentioned by the looping teachers which challenged them from time to time, one was the idea that familiarity breeds contempt. This caused some conflicts with the looping teachers, as they had to decide which discipline issues were ones that needed their intervention and which did not. With some students the looping relationship had become very casual, which challenged the ideals of the relationship and the fine line of what was acceptable behavior and what was not. Students and teachers wanted to be approachable but not at the expense or compromise of losing respect for each other. One looping team experienced this more than the other. As one teacher indicated, "The students knew where we drew the line."

The looping teachers relationships in this study were collegial as they were dedicated as a team to maximize its potential. Both teams had individual planning time as well as team time scheduled daily to optimize learning opportunities for their students and themselves as professionals. Problematic for Team B was several staffing changes that took place over the course of the two looping years. Due to increased enrollment, changes in team configuration, and staff transfer this particular team had only two teachers who had previously looped with students in middle school. The other three teachers were new to the team, new to the middle school, and new to looping. However, it is my understanding there had been input in hiring personnel placed on the looping team, which provided additional time for transition and orientation for these new staff members. For this team, the development of its professional relationships was occurring at the same time it was developing relationships with its students. Despite this, I believe that the conditions and teacher attitudes of teaming were in place to facilitate the successful development of their relationships and effective teaming practices. Each team member brought a unique perspective to the team and was a contributing factor to the team and looping process. This was evident by the activities and instructional decisions that this team made over the course of the two looping years.

Student relationships. Student relationships were also positively impacted through the process of looping. One of the unanticipated findings of this study was the strength of peer relationships developed on the looping teams. For most students, even those who did not prefer the looping arrangement commented that their friendships were stronger because of looping. These students had two years in which to develop and work together to form friendships. This surprised me because some adolescents often times change friends frequently. For many adolescents this can be painful time as mere words, a boyfriend or girlfriend's unanswered call, or assumed associations can alter a friendship or relationship. Professionally, I had worked with many middle school

students experiencing significant emotional traumas caused by friendship problems. Looping provided the students a stable environment to develop these friendships along with guidance on how to maintain these friendships.' One team took respect and cooperation to a different level when they surveyed their students to find out who was being harassed and who was doing the harassing. Their lessons were centered on the concepts of developing mutual respect, acceptance of diversity, and tolerance. They were also able to work with those students who had become victims of bullying and teasing as well as work with the students who were doing the actual harassment. This activity was initiated in the 7th grade year when the team identified this area of need for their students. From that point out, students knew they could talk with their teachers about these issues, as they understood the value their teachers placed on working together.

The looping students spent time investing in the development of relationships with their peers not only because of the instructional time spent together but also because of the grouping and regrouping strategies employed by their looping teachers. Looping Team B frequently organized extended learning activities for the whole group for presentations, awards ceremonies, and team meetings. Cooperative learning groups were utilized frequently including group projects, assignments, and presentations throughout the course of the looping experience.

Interesting to note, students that were shy (as identified by themselves on the surveys) were able to develop close relations with their fellow classmates. Also, students who had friends on the other team indicated that they developed closer friendships with their peers on the looping team. Not only did the teachers commit themselves to developing relationships, they encouraged their students and set up learning opportunities for them to do the same.

Parent relationships with teachers and school. From the parent perspective, looping relationships played a role in helping the parents better understand the expectations that the looping teachers affirmed for student learning. In most respects communication was improved and enhanced because parents knew their child's teachers. One looping teacher made a request to her students in regard to 8th grade parents attending open house, "I want you to make sure your parents attend open house this next week, and if we haven't met them as of yet, that's ridiculous, it's been almost two years, and you should really get on them about not knowing your teachers." The looping teachers encouraged parent involvement and believed they could be more candid with parents when discussing the needs of their children. Looping provided more opportunities for parents to get involved with their children's academic work and with the looping team of teachers. Developing partnerships with parents was a necessity for the looping teachers to reinforce high expectations for learning, monitor student progress, and attend to the social emotional needs of their students. Ten parents out of the 11 interviewed expressed that they were involved with their student's education and the looping teachers worked well with them to attend to their concerns or questions. The parents also believed that they could contact their team of teachers for most any reason, that they would be listened to, and there would be follow through in regard to their question or concern.

Positive relationships helped to build trust and respect for most all involved in this study. The design of looping provided the "gift of time" for the participants in the study to develop and sustain relationships that promoted learning, accountability for achievement, and personal growth.

Sense of knowing and belonging. Students, teachers, and parents in the study expressed a sense of knowing and belonging as they learned how to interact with one another. Additionally, they also worked together in establishing shared values of high

expectations as well as working to one's potential. The looping process at this particular middle school enabled 80% of the participants' ample time to develop positive relationships, creating a sense of community. Contemporary research on the dimensions of a sense of community mirror the emergent themes that evolved in this study – shared values, commitment, belonging, caring, interdependence, and regular contact (Bryk and Driscoll, 1988; Royal and Rossi, 1996; and Sergiovanni,1994, 2000). With so much pressure on schools to perform in the areas of accountability, testing, and continuous improvement, priorities that depend on the development of personal relationships are often diminished when they should be at the forefront of educating our children.

Students and parents believed that the looping teams cared for their students and if there were problems in class, the student would receive help from one of the looping teachers. The majority of looping students believed that if they had a personal problem at school that there was a caring adult with whom they could talk to about those issues. As one looping teacher indicated,

> "I think that's so good for them to have an adult to talk to- not just their parent, somebody they totally like and look up to, have a good time with....can have normal conversations with and can laugh with so they know that not all adults are ragging on them all the time – a good relationship with a positive adult in 8th grade – I would think it is so much worth it as a parent."

There were 22 students who indicated that they would not talk with their teachers, as it was their personal business and not appropriate to talk to teachers about these issues. I was surprised to learn that these students believed personal issues could not be shared with their teachers. This could be attributed to lack of trust with teachers or as one student indicated, "Fear they would be placed in a different program," if they told a teacher about their problems. Important here is that students should feel they have at

least one adult in the school whom they can confide in, for these students that was not the case. Despite this, some of these students shared their preference in speaking with their parents as one responded, "I don't like sharing my feelings with anyone but my Mom."

Successful middle school teams promote sense of community by organizing specific team rules, team identity, themes or mottos for the classroom, including instructional activities that promote their unique developmental needs or "growing up" experiences. Many young adolescents need this feeling of personal belonging and identity because they themselves feel isolated and in search of developing who they want to be and who they are as people. Looping provides the mechanism for students to work together, feel accomplished, and take pride in being part of a productive group.

While the parents interviewed and surveyed did not accentuate the theme of sense of belonging as compared to the students and teachers, most parents believed the looping teams would respond if they had a concern. In fact, several parents reiterated that the looping teams of teachers were very responsive and timely to their requests and students' needs. I will illuminate more of these ideas in the parent involvement section later in this chapter.

Academic accountability and Curriculum planning. In my educational experiences, I have learned that positive relationships with staff, students, and parents can create a very empowered school community. In the looping environment, these positive relationships created learning opportunities that became conduits for learning. Academically, students were held more accountable for their work and were expected to perform to their potential. The quality of their work was more scrutinized thus students were held to a higher standard of achievement. The students emphasized those beliefs in their comments about their grades. One student states, "My grades are better because I've grown to know how well they want or expect things to be." Another student

references the relationship with the looping teachers, "They understand me better and how my learning process is."

According to the looping teachers, both teams indicated having a better understanding about the individual needs and challenges of their students. Looping provided more time to diagnose a potential learning problem or deal with lack of performance. Some of the looping teachers were able to mentor those low performing students over two years, which led to consistent thoughtful work, better grades, and in some cases much improved behavior. If the low performing students had been placed with a different group of teachers in their 8th grade year, it may have taken four to six weeks for the team of teachers to realize the academic potential or problems of those individual students. Looping can provide more opportunity for academic accountability and continuity of instruction to occur over a period of two years or more.

Additionally, I learned the looping teams afforded students choices in their learning which promoted ownership in their learning. The looping teachers also had an opportunity to place students in classes that they believed best fit the students' needs. Several looping teachers selected students (that needed attention) and placed them in their advisory or integrated classes to mentor their progress and sustain their improved efforts. Teachers mentored several students that needed on-going support and assistance due to poor academic progress or social-emotional needs. Not unless grade level teams had communicated the needs of the students to the new team of teachers, would this type of scheduling or conversation took place.

Special activities and field trips were organized to extend learning such as a trip to Springfield, Illinois to study the historical events of state history. Looping Team A also sent home a monthly newsletter reminding parents of missing assignments, long-term project due dates, and provided strategies on how parents could assist their student at home with their schoolwork. As a means to instill cooperation and develop teamwork,

Team B created mini-Olympics where students rotated within their classrooms for team building activities. I believe the looping teachers were committed to this pedagogical design to meet the unique needs of their students in the middle school setting and provided many learning opportunities in which to do so.

I also believe the looping teachers exhibited a level of interdependence that sometimes goes unnoticed in a large middle school. The looping teachers regularly met to discuss students, curriculum, and meet with parents or other specialists on staff. These teachers deliberately planned lessons based upon the knowledge of their student's strengths and weaknesses. Looping Team A created assessments that promoted the skill of writing across the curriculum because they knew they had two years in which to improve that skill. Often, it is difficult to assess skills over a period of just one school year. The looping teachers made efforts to create interdisciplinary lessons and integrate instruction. While the teaming process at the middle school level provides this opportunity for any team of teachers, the looping teams had more to gain by modeling their cooperative efforts and working collectively as a looping team.

Transition. Students were able to make a seamless transition from the 7th to 8th grade school year in a time when they were experiencing many developmental changes physically, intellectually, and social-emotionally. According to this research, the first days of school were enjoyable for most students and teachers. They both knew what to expect, what to reinforce, and they all knew their peers and each other fairly well. There was little time spent on school orientation and both the teachers and students believed learning started from day one of the school year.

For those students who were not comfortable with the looping process, they felt that the beginning of the year was as they put it, "more of the same." These few students had wished to be with friends on the other team and voiced their discontent about not having a choice to loop with their teachers and classmates. However, I do

know through my former experiences at the school if parents believed there was a mismatch between their student and team of teachers, it was likely that their request to change teams would be honored. I did not investigate if they had pursued that option for placement as the surveys were anonymous but according to the principal of the school, there were few requests to change teams.

Most disconcerting for over 50% of the students surveyed were their concerns about making the transition to high school. Incoming transition to the middle school as 5th or 6th graders becomes a priority but educators must carefully plan for the exit transition of 8th graders into the high school. These students who voiced their anxiety and nervousness about going to the high school were worried about many facets of school life, many which dealt with relationships. Some of the students indicated:

"I'm scared, I don't want to leave my friends, I'll lose the closeness."
"I'll have to adjust to everything - teachers, friends, sports.."
"I'm nervous, the school is so big and I won't know anyone."

I shared this information with both looping teams which allowed them an opportunity to discuss these issues with their students as they prepared the students for the high school program. Transition to the 9th grade is as critical as the transition into the middle school for the first time. Special attention and careful thought must be given to this process to ensure a smooth transition for all involved – students, parents, and teachers.

Parent Involvement. From my experience in education, parent involvement in the middle school often time decline as their student grows. Some parents disengage in school activities once their child reaches middle school and most often have little or no involvement during the high school years. The importance of family involvement has become part of a national agenda as schools across the country have prioritized parent

involvement as an integral part of any school improvement plan. According to recent research on parent involvement in K-12 schools there is a link to enhanced student cognitive and affective outcomes (Sanders and Epstein, 1998; Desimone, 1999). Forged parent partnerships have created before and after school programs, community partnerships, and instilled more sensitivity and understanding to what it takes to raise a child in the our quick paced technological society.

Through the responses shared on the surveys, parents affirmed a better understanding of what was expected of their children. Almost two-thirds of the respondents indicated that communication was comfortable with the looping teachers during the 8th grade year. And most importantly, these parents believed that the teachers better understood the academic needs and strengths of their students in the 8th grade year.

This looping research reinforces the work of J.P. Garvin who conducted research in effective middle schools found "parent involvement crucial to school effectiveness" (1984, p.33). His priorities are paraphrased and outlined as follows:

- Parents want their student to be safe in and around school.
- Parents want their student to know at least one adult well enough to help with problems.
- Parents expect that constructive interpersonal relationships be emphasized.
- Parents associate their student's happiness with a strong sense of belonging.
- Parents want their students to experience success every day to reinforce good feelings about returning to school the next day.

- Parents want their student to be academically challenged with realistic learning goals.
- Parents want to be informed about their student's progress or possible problems.
- Parents want to have a relationship with the teachers, feel welcomed at the school, known by name, and invited to attend school events.
- Parents want support from the school to help them learn more about their student's academic and social strengths and needs.

The looping teams developed partnerships with their parents by keeping them informed of school events, sending home special newsletters and announcements, providing assignment information on the homework hotline, inviting them to chaperone field trips, and making time in which to meet with parents beyond parent conference times. These looping teachers aspired to similar values that parents expressed in the research cited above. Looping teachers developed and sustained relationships with their students and parents to create this shared partnership that prioritized academic learning and personal growth.

Alternative Perspectives. When looping relationships did not develop or sustain, this became cause for concern for all of the participants involved. In particular for about 20% of the students and parents who were not committed to the looping process this arrangement did not provide the opportunity to learn from different teachers or meet new friends in the middle school setting.

Another caveat to this theme involved teacher objectivity and how teachers were professionally challenged when relationships did not work. This contradicts the research that promotes teachers are less likely to "write off" students who are difficult to teach as they have more time to develop a relationship (Arhar, 1992 p.155; George and

Alexander, 1993 p.335, Jackson and Davis p. 134). One looping team voiced a concern in regard to familiarity. A few of the teachers struggled with the notion that "familiarity breeds contempt" and how could they teach students if the student behavior did not conform to their expectations. One looping team consulted the parent of a student who just would not comply with the team's learning and behavior expectations. This "equal opportunity aggravator" as the team labeled him was disruptive and not working up to his potential. The end result was a change for the 8th grade year to the non-looping team. While the looping team was disappointed that a resolution could not be reached, they did indicate the student was still having the same difficulties with the non-looping team of teachers. So, a new set of teachers did not impact the necessary changes to make this student successful. Situations like these do challenge teachers or a team's objectivity regardless if they are looping or not. However, in the context of looping, I wondered if familiarity created a "spoiled" identity in the first year for this student how were teachers to overcome these types of situation with either students or parents? I firmly believe that no matter what organizational pattern is employed if there is not a respectful relationship developed, there will be little academic progress or satisfaction in learning.

Furthermore, if the looping relationships had not been identified as favorable and positive in this study, I believe a higher percentage of alternative views would have emerged and other themes more negatively portrayed. In retrospect, when students and teachers cannot develop a learning relationship there must be a safety net for all involved. Students and teachers who cannot connect in a looping environment should be afforded a change to another team as a last resort to working out the concerns or problem. Looping arrangements should model cooperation and collaborative decisions made on behalf of the participants involved. This type of situation is a potential "pit-fall" in looping. If relationships cannot be restored and reconstructed to best meet the need of the student and parent, then another placement must be considered.

Another area of concern was voiced by one parent during the interview process was placement of students on the looping team. Apparently, in her opinion, Team A did not offer as many honors classes as the non-looping team. In fact, there was only one honors section of math offered. The other team offered both honors math, and honors reading-language arts. Students who qualified for the honors reading/language arts were automatically placed on the non-looping teams for 7th and 8th grade. This parent's perception was the looping team in her own words was the "dummy team." Since honors placement involved evaluation of test scores including teacher recommendation, it is my understanding that only 25 students did make the cut scores for placement. However, she had a valid concern in that the scheduling of heterogeneous groups was important as not to track all of the low performing students into one team's schedule. This concern was rectified the following year when both looping teams were organized with honors classes.

Respondents who voiced alternative perspectives provided insight as how to organize future looping situations and what conditions were needed to satisfy all involved in this middle school setting. These suggestions will be shared in the concluding remarks and recommendations for future looping practice.

Overview of the Findings. In conclusion, the following overview outlines the findings of this study from each of the participants:

Students

- 10 of the 12 students interviewed viewed looping as favorable.
- 80% of the students surveyed approved of looping.
- Students knew expectations for learning and behavior.
- Students developed close friendships with peers on looping team.
- 20% of the students surveyed preferred having new teachers
- Students believed they should have a choice to loop or not loop.

Teachers

- Most teachers preferred the looping arrangement
- Strategic planning of curriculum and learning activities was evident.
- Familiarity became a concern for some when students became too comfortable with teachers in the looping setting.
- Teachers better understood the academic strengths and weaknesses of their students.
- Teachers became advocates for students with special academic or social needs.

Parents

- 10 of the 12 parents interviewed viewed looping as favorable.
- 83% believed teachers better understood their child's academic strengths and needs.
- 80% indicated their child better understood learning expectations.
- 78% shared their student enjoyed being with the same classmates for two years.
- 74% felt the start of 8th grade was less stressful.
- 20% preferred new teachers and a choice not to loop.

Generalizations of this Study

There are many ways in which to organize students for learning. Looping, along with other organizational designs such as: multiage, non-graded, or school-within-a-school can achieve high standards of learning regardless of resources and demographics. Learning goals, high achievement outcomes, and the conditions in which

there occur are more important than the organizational design. However, these organizational patterns allow opportunities for teaching and learning to occur through developing and sustaining long-term relationships which is essential to teaching and learning under any conditions.

According to the emergent themes, all three groups of participants agree 80% that looping created positive relationships that promoted better understanding of the developmental needs of the students. Students understood expectations and teachers expected students to know those expectations. For the looping teachers there was a heightened sense of awareness of both the academic and socio-emotional needs of the students. Two years of working closely with the students allowed more time for assessment and evaluation of student needs. The looping teachers had more time in which to make interventions or plan for academic improvement.

Parents indicate that the looping teachers better understood the needs of their children which improved home-school communication for many of them. Transition into the 8th grade for almost 90% of those involved in looping was seamless and very positive. The looping participants experienced reduced anxiety and less stress in starting the 8th grade as the second looping year began. Because of this commitment to work together over two years, most of the looping students also developed long-term relationships with their peers.

For the 20% that did not favor looping, it was due to their need to have a change of teachers or possible personality conflict with the looping teachers. The few that were apprehensive about looping preferred to have a choice in looping or wanted to be with their friends on the non-looping team. Few reported having difficulty with a looping teacher or expressed concern about exposure to a sub-par teacher.

Finally, while the instructional practices and commitment of working with students from this research project is evident in any effective middle school, the essence of

looping is deeply rooted in middle school philosophy. The sense of community that is developed through the looping process creates opportunities for extended learning and achievement that non-looping groups are not afforded. Looping builds a foundation for learning because relationships are positively developed and sustained over time, this is the key factor associated with successful looping experiences.

Relationship of this study to prior looping research

Looping is not a new trend or idea. In fact looping dates back to the one room schoolhouse originating in the United States in the 1800's. From the review of the literature, I learned that looping practices are deeply rooted in education and for the most part influenced by our European counterparts. The research from this study emulates the elements of looping from several of the European schools mentioned in the literature review. The establishment of long-term relationships, ease in transition and teacher accountability were all factors in successful looping schools in Germany, Austria, China, and Japan as well as an integral part of this research study.

Research of looping is limited, especially at the middle school level. Review of this research, indicates there were only four other studies that involved middle school communities: 1) Paul George and Kathy Shewey – University of Florida (1997); 2) The Delta Project – Georgia (1997); 3) Tolland Middle School - Connecticut (1997); and 4) Attleboro School District – Massachusetts (1995).

This research study provided voice to the looping participants. Every comment and statement shared about looping articulated his or her perspectives on looping practice. Their voices collectively echoed recent middle school looping research conducted by Paul George and Kathy Shewey (1997). George and Shewey conducted a case study involving over 35 schools from 14 states that raised the question, "What happens when teams of middle school teachers and students stay together form more

than one year?" Their study revealed that interpersonal relationships were paramount to success of long-term relationships. As previously stated, the emergent themes of looping would have taken on a totally different perspective if relationships had not been developed or sustained through the looping process. Students, teachers, and parents from their study also supported the looping arrangement. Academic accountability was also a factor as teachers created assignments and other learning activities that were interest based and better associated to achievement. While discipline was not the scope of this research, as in the George and Shewey study, I believe that the looping teachers were more effective in dealing with their students due to the commitment to develop relationships with their students and parents. Most of the participants in the George-Shewey case study were supportive of the looping arrangement as were 80% of the participants were favorable in this study. Additionally, similar concerns were raised by the teachers working with George and Shewey and in this study about personality conflicts and discontent. While all three groups of participants shared similar views about their experiences in looping, the most important aspect of both studies confirmed that looping relationships were developed for learning and meeting the unique developmental needs of adolescents.

Secondly, the Delta Project, (a three-year longitudinal study) was conducted by middle school teachers and university researchers in rural Georgia. Similar to Team A from this looping study, a team of teachers wanted to stay with their students as they progressed to the next grade. The Delta teachers hoped to create this sense of community by teaching higher-order thinking skills, incorporating more problem-based learning, and improving self-concept or esteem. Students in the study perceived learning to be challenging and liked the variety of individual and group projects the teachers assigned. The looping teams from this study also incorporated project-based learning and cooperative activities that allowed students to learn from each other.

Students indicated that they knew their peers well due to the looping arrangement and the opportunities to work together. Expectations were a common theme between both studies, as expectations were well known by both students and teachers. Teachers in both studies promoted effective characteristics of teams and worked diligently to plan an effective learning environment based upon the needs of their students. The emergent themes of this looping study support the benefits realized from the Delta Project.

A third study involved teachers and staff from Tolland Middle School in Connecticut. As like the teachers from the Delta Project, the Tolland teachers voiced their desire to stay with their students as they progressed to the next grade. While looping provided stability for some adolescents of this particular school district, the staff focused on forming long lasting relationships to promote increased academic time, reduction of discipline referrals and to enhance parent support (Lincoln, 1997). The looping relationships developed in this study promoted reduced transition time, built parent and student capacity, and for most involved provided stability for most all students involved. These characteristics reflect the findings for this study as students expressed ease in transition to 8th grade, a feeling of belonging, and positive working relationships with teachers and peers.

Theoretical Implications of Looping to Middle School Philosophy

Learning and instruction in the middle school environment is grounded upon understanding the unique developmental needs of adolescents. Teams of teachers work collaboratively to plan and coordinate instruction that is authentic, relevant to their real world, and offer students choices in their learning. Partnerships are forged with parents to promote high academic achievement and to work together to best meet the needs of their student. The *Turning Points* (1989) research provides the framework for working with young adults:

> The middle grade school proposed is profoundly different from many schools today. It focuses squarely on the characteristics and needs of young adolescents. It creates a community of adults and young people embedded in networks of support and responsibility that enhances the commitment of students to learning. In partnership with youth serving and community organizations, it offers multiple sites and multiple methods for fostering the learning and heath of adolescents. The combined efforts create a community of shared purpose among those concerned that all young adolescents are prepared for productive adult lives, especially those at risk of being left behind (p.36).

Looping is a network of support and promotes the *Turning Points* (2000) recommendation of organizing relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose (Jackson and Davis, p.24). Recommendations from this research promote looping for the entire middle school experience or for at least for two years. Looping relationships become conduits for learning – intentionally set-up to foster reaching each student's potential. Emotional attachments can be very critical to effective learning. When students feel a sense of belonging to a group with shared goals they become more motivated to learn and stay engaged.

In large middle schools, looping becomes a school-within-a school to develop this sense of community and promote high expectations for learning. Students don't "fall through the cracks" when teachers are committed to long-term relationships. I believe that looping at the middle school level can also deter school violence. Looping is a more personalized approach to learning and provides students opportunities to be known well by several adults.

Adolescents have diverse needs in all areas of their development. Looping teachers strategically plan curriculum, assessment, and adapt approaches to different

learning styles. Teachers employ a variety of strategies to teach their students and strive to balance process and content. Assessments drive instruction and are the focus of teaching. Skills are developed as well as conceptual knowledge and content of knowledge. The teaming process is collaborative as well as the practice of looping. Looping extends this collaboration over time to build the knowledge and skills that young adolescents need to be successful productive citizens.

Finally, school transitions are critical turning points for adolescents as they make adjustments to new teachers and friends. Looping reduces transition time between grade levels and provides more instructional time as students and teachers virtually pick up where they left off the previous year. Middle school looping reinforces the basic tenets of middle school concepts and reaffirms the philosophy on educating adolescents to best meet their unique and diverse needs in both the cognitive and affective domains.

Recommendations of Looping as Middle School Practice

Turning Points researchers, Jackson and Davis (2000) recommend looping practice at the middle school level, "Looping promotes organizational relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose." In this new millennium as we search for effective school practices that help students achieve high standards and promote accountability, the practice of looping, (if done well and supported by the school community), will raise academic achievement and foster caring relationships for all those involved. The essence of looping is the promotion of strong, extended, meaningful, positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (Burke, 1997). Looping offers security, stability, and continuity for all of the important developmental needs of middle school students. According to Mee (1997), "To know and understand

adolescents fully, educators need to develop long-term relationships that provide sense of stability, reassure their views of the world, school, and themselves (p.12).

Recommendations based upon this research including my professional experiences for the successful implementation of looping at the middle school level are as follows:

- All stakeholders and participants need to be committed to developing and sustaining long-term relationships in the middle school context.
- Looping teams need to have expertise in middle school philosophy and committed to teaming practices.
- All members of the school community should have ownership in the process of looping and a "voice" to choose looping or not.
- Looping teachers should be well versed in standards-based curriculum, interdisciplinary teaching, assessment, and data analysis to best identify academic strengths and challenges for students.
- Administration should work closely with looping teams to assist in identification of learning goals and assist with the implementation plan.
- Looping teachers should collaborate with the administration on hiring members to work on their professional teaching team.
- Looping teachers should be hired with the understanding that looping is the organizational structure for learning in a middle school environment.
- Looping teachers should be experienced in teaching and relate well with others.
- Looping teams of teachers should be provided time to develop the looping curriculum and additional time for staff development to integrate instruction.
- Administrative support is paramount in assisting with personality conflicts and there should be alternative non-looping placements for students, if needed.

- Looping team consistency is critical to extending the learning relationships and providing continuity amongst the grade levels when looping. Changes in staff in between grades can be disruptive to the looping process.
- Looping and non-looping classes should have the same academic offerings as not to track students.
- Looping teams should pay special attention to transitional needs of students and parents planning programs that address these needs coming into the middle school and transitioning out into the high school program.
- Special needs students and other students with learning challenges should be equally placed on looping and non-looping teams.
- Extended learning opportunities such as field trips, school and community service, and other special events should be promoted to create sense of community for looping participants.
- Parents collaborate with teachers to develop partnerships in learning and be willing to support education in the home. On going communication is a priority.
- Looping students collaborate with their teachers to take an active role in their learning and work along side their teachers in planning their experiences.

Future Studies

Qualitative inquiry can also lead the researcher into unexpected areas or raise questions not considered. Qualitative research often times leads or points the way for other studies or other inquires (Glesne, 1999). On this looping journey other questions I identified:

1) How does looping vs. non-looping student achievement compare?

2) Do middle school looping students have more difficulty in making the transition into the high school program?
3) How do looping teachers evaluate data to promote learning?
4) How does gender impact the looping environment?
5) Does gender impact achievement in the looping context?
6) Does gender of teacher impact looping experience?
7) Is looping different in small K-8 schools where looping necessitates the instructional design?
8) How can schools organize relationships to promote learning?

Another area of future study deals with the context of learning. Recent studies on how people learn, brain research, and implications for what we teach evolve around the process of transfer (National Research Council, 2000). The NRC outlines some examples I feel relevant to the looping instructional design:

- Research on learning and transfer has uncovered important principles for structuring learning experiences that enable people to use what they have learned in new settings.
- Work in social psychology, cognitive psychology, and anthropology is making clear that all learning takes place in settings that have particular sets of cultural and social norms and expectations that these settings influence learning and transfer in powerful ways.
- Collaborative studies of the design and evaluation of learning environments are yielding new knowledge about the nature of learning and teaching as it takes place in a variety of settings. Researchers are discovering ways to learn from the "wisdom of practice" that comes from successful teachers who can share their expertise (p.4).

The looping teams of teachers intentionally plan the process of learning and have the autonomy to extend those experiences that lead to transfer. Transfer is defined as: the ability to extend what has been learned in one context and applied to new contexts (Byrnes, 1996, p. 74). While not the scope of this study, I am fascinated by the idea that transfer of learning has positive implications for looping teams as the quality of learning experiences and the autonomy teams have in organizing their learning environment over the course of two years are considered. If looping teams create active engaged learning experiences that promote mastery of skills, provide consistent feedback on how students are to use knowledge, and apply the concepts of transfer to their instructional practices, these actions holds promise for creating higher levels of literacy and achievement as life-long learners. It is my hope these questions may lead to future study of looping in middle schools and provide an expanded knowledge base in the context of looping.

Conclusion

Glesne (1999) eloquently states, "Qualitative inquiry is a search that leads into others' lives, your discipline, your practice, and yourself." I have learned from this inquiry that looping practice is not costly to implement but an investment in people. Looping holds great promise in the organization of middle schools by creating small communities of learners. The looping students' personal successes became points of interest and pride among all of the participants. Looping teachers also considered affective factors to ascertain success as well as diagnosed academic strengths and weaknesses. Educational success was not solely dependant on academic or cognitive indicators. The development of profound learning relationships occurred and was experienced by most (80%) of the participants in this study. Looping enhances teaching and learning experiences as personal relationships are developed with all stakeholders

in the school community. Looping provides the stability of a nurturing family yet promotes the values of learning and growing together as members of that community of learners. Feelings of belonging enhance the quality of education and promote motivation and desire to achieve. Academic achievement in the looping environment contributes to student well-being and self-actualization. Looping can foster an environment of acceptance and belonging, which is paramount in preventing school violence and promoting respect. Adolescents need to experience commitment and perseverance to learn first hand the value of working towards goals and the fulfillment of being involved in positive relationships with adults and peers. Finally, developing and sustaining relationships is the hallmark of looping which provides a precious commodity of time to ensure that no child is left behind.

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Appendixes

Appendix A	Standards Ethics Protocol Permission to Conduct Research
Appendix B	Student In-depth Interview Questions
Appendix C	Selection of Students for Interviews
Appendix D	Teams of Teachers In-depth Interview Questions
Appendix E	Parents In-depth Interview Questions
Appendix F	Students Open-ended Survey Questions
Appendix G	Teachers Open-ended Survey Questions
Appendix H	Parents Close-ended Survey Questions-2000-2001
Appendix I	Parents Close-ended Survey Questions-2001-2002
Appendix J	Students Survey Responses

Appendix A

Standard Ethics Protocol for Dissertation Project
Permission to Conduct Student Interview

Hello, my name is Debbie Kerr. I am a researcher on a dissertation project entitled:

"In the Loop" – Responses about looping at the middle school level as seen through different lenses.

I am the principal investigator of this project. I am writing my dissertation about looping practices at the middle school level. I am interested in learning about your opinions and feelings about this arrangement where you have had your teachers for two years in a row.

This project is being sponsored by the Educational Leadership Department at National-Louis University, Wheeling, IL.

This form is a permission slip to indicate your willingness to assist me in my research project. Your participation would be very much appreciated. My study design requires that I interview six students – three boys and three girls. Your name was submitted to me by your team of teachers.

Here are your rights as a participant in the study if you agree to participate:

1) Your participation is voluntary.
2) You are free to not answer any question at any time.
3) You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.
4) This interview is strictly confidential.
5) Excerpts of this interview may be a part of the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name, school, or any identifying characteristics be included in this report.

I would be grateful if you (both parent and student) would sign this form to indicate that you have read its content and would be willing to volunteer for this interview. I will conduct the interview during non-academic time most likely during 9th or 10th hours. Each interview should last about 20-25 minutes.

_____	_____
(Parent Signature)	(Student Signature)
_____	_____
(Printed Name)	(Printed Name)
_____	_____
(Date)	(Date)

Please send me a report on the results of this research project (circle one) Yes No
Write address:

_____

If you have any questions about this project, contact me at (847)-395-7805.

Appendix B

Student Interview Questions

1. What is your age?

2. What are your favorite things to do outside of school?

3. What are your favorite things (classes, activities, etc) to do at school?

4. Try to think of what it was like coming to school on the first day as an 8th grader.....can you describe what it was like?

5. Were you nervous about starting the new school year? Why or why not?

6. Did you talk about the beginning of school with your friends? What kinds of things did you talk about? (clothes, supplies, boyfriend/girlfriend, etc.)

7. Did you know what Prime Time (advisory) that you were going to be in?

8. Were you happy about that? Why or why not?

9. Do you think that having the same teacher/s for two years has been good for you so far? Why or why not?

10. Have you liked being with the same teachers for two years in a row? If so, what have been some of those reasons or if not, why.....

11. Do you feel closer to your teachers this year? If yes, how so.....if no, what have been the obstacles?

12. Do you like school better this year, the same, or less....why.....

13. If you had a serious personal problem, is there a teacher that you could talk to....who would that person be and why would you choose them...

14. If you were given the choice to loop with your teachers how would you feel about that.....has looping been a good thing for you.....explain....

Appendix C

Selection of Students for In-depth Interview

dkerr

> Here's what I need from you.....6 students that I can interview about
> looping....
>
> I need 3 girls; 3 boys;
> keeping in mind low, middle, & high achievement
> socio-economic factors & ethnicity....
>
> I need a mix of students to verify the data....so one boy could have high
> achievement, one other could be middle keeping in mind socio-ecomics &
> ethnicity.....(I realize that you may not have much ethnicity.....)

From: Tonya Steitz [TSteitz@dist34.lake.k12.il.us]
Sent: Wednesday, January 03, 2001 6:41 AM
To: 'dkerr@acronet.net'
Subject: RE: Student Interviews

Well, here's what we came up with for your interview:

Melissa Cole-	high achiev/ low economic
Alyssa Giannoni-	low achiev/ middle economic
Samantha Riley-	Middle achiev/high economic
Tim Racette-	High achiev/middle economic
Scott Georgeson-	middle achiev/ middle econ
Joe Hernandez-	low achiev/ low economic

From: Jay Marshall [JMarshall@dist34.lake.k12.il.us]
Sent: Monday, October 22, 2001 1:08 PM
To: 'dkerr@acronet.net'
Cc: Marge DeWolfe; Eric Skoog
Subject: RE: Student Interviews-Friday, October 26

I will send a copy of this to Eric and let him decide. He is at the Principal's conference until Wednesday so I will cc it to Marge too. I would think that would be fine. I don't mind if they miss my class. the specials might like not having kids pulled out. I will contact them and let you know. See you Friday

The six kids are Adam Rafaelov, Steve Suhar, Ben Henning, Sarah Lenkowski, Gretchen Kessel, and Leslie Williams. Leslie is the only one that still has her permission form. I will continue to remind her.

Jay
Peace! I :-) •

Appendix D

Focus Team Interview

Guiding Questions

This research study hopes to discover and examine the responses of middle school students, teachers, and parents engaged in the looping process.

1. *How long has your team been working together?*

2. *Describe how your team decided upon what subjects each of you would teach?*

3. *What types of activities have been included in your "advisory" program? (Advisory is a separate class where the curriculum is focused on the affective needs of the students. It is a class of about 20 minutes where students participate in enrichment activities, personal development activities, or group discussions. The team of teachers develop the lessons for this class)*

4. *What activities in your "advisory" program are you most proud of?*

5. *Describe your plans for interdisciplinary units for this year.*

6. *What activities from your interdisciplinary units are you most proud of?*

7. *Describe the group of students that you have in this looping cycle in terms of academic strengths/needs and social-emotional strengths/needs.....*

8. *Knowing these things about your students, tell me how you organized your first couple of days this past August/September.....*

9. *Because you know your students well, tell me how this has influenced the organization of your classroom and instructional practices?*

10. *In terms of team planning, how has knowing your students impacted the way you have conducted team business?*

11. *Describe the student/s who really made progress with your team this past year and what strategies did your team use to assist these students.*

12. *Describe a student/s who you wished would have performed better. What were the obstacles for that student/s.*

13. *Thinking about the past three years of looping with your students, what have been some of the limitations?*

14. *What have been some of the benefits?*

15. *Has looping helped you to know your parents better? Do you believe they are involved as much as they should be?*

Appendix E

Parent In-depth Interview Questions

1. What did you like best about the Upper Grade School?
2. If you could change something about the Upper Grade school what would that be and why?
3. What was the beginning of school like for your son or daughter in the 8th grade year? How would you describe your students' feelings or attitudes towards school?
4. Do you feel that "transition" was a problem for your student going into 8th grade?
5. How well did you know your students' team of teachers?
6. Did you feel that you could contact them? – Why or why not?
7. If you had to contact them was their response helpful to you and your student? If not, what would you have liked to have happen?
8. Describe your experiences with Parent-Teacher conferences with the looping team of teachers?
9. Describe your experience with Student-led conferences? What were your thoughts about this process?
10. Academically, do you believe that the team of teachers understood your students' ability & potential? If yes, how do you know that? If no, what were the obstacles?
11. In terms of personal and social needs, do you believe that the team of teachers knew your student well? If yes, how do you know? If no, why not?
12. How would you describe your student's relationships with peers? Did your student have many friends on the looping team?
13. Was the looping experience a positive or challenging situation for your student? Why?
14. Do you believe that your student was prepared to go to high-school?
15. What do you think helped your student to succeed in middle school?
16. Is there anything else that your would like to tell me about your student's middle school experience?

Appendix F

8th Grade Student Looping Survey

Dear 8th grade Student:

I'd like you to share your thoughts with me about your 7th & 8th grade looping experience. I am working on a research project to complete my doctorate degree. Each survey is anonymous and voluntary. This information will be used in my study as I write my dissertation about looping at the middle school level. I appreciate your time and assistance with this project.

Sincerely,
Ms. Kerr

1. Describe your thoughts and feelings about starting 8th grade with the same team of teachers? What were those first couple of days like?
2. What do you like best about your middle school?
3. If you could change one thing at school, what would that be and why?
4. Tell me about your strengths as a student or what your good points are.
5. Do you think that your team of teachers recognize your strengths? Why or why not?
6. Do you feel that having the same teachers for two years has been good for you? Why or why not?
7. Describe your relationship with your team of teachers over the past two years?
8. Describe your relationship with your classmates on the looping team?
9. Describe what your friendships are like with others on the looping team?
10. Do you feel that you can talk to your teachers about important personal issues? If so, who would you choose to speak with and why? If no, what issues would hold you back from talking with your teachers?
11. Are your grades better this year than last year? Why or why not?
12. Has your attendance been better this year as compared to last year?
13. What did you like best about the looping experience with your team of teachers?
14. If you could change or make a suggestion about the looping program, what would that be?
15. What are your thoughts about moving on to high-school?
16. What do you think has been most helpful in your success at school?

Appendix G

Looping Teacher Survey

Please complete the following survey & return to me by March 22, 2002. Circle SA-strongly agree, A-agree, U-unsure, D-disagree, SD-strongly disagree. Please share any reflections, thoughts, or ideas related to the question. Feel free to use as much space as needed. I really appreciate your time on this matter. This survey is anonymous and with your permission will be used to continue research of looping for my dissertation.

Questions/Reflections:

1. Do you believe that "looping" with the same students has been beneficial to your students? SA A U D SD

Reflection:

2. Did you notice improvement in your students' behavior within your classes this past school year? SA A U D SD

Reflection:

3. Did you notice improvement in your students' academic performance this past school year? SA A U D SD

Reflection:

4. Did you notice improvement in your students' attendance this past school year? SA A U D SD

Reflection:

5. Did communication between you and your students' parents improve this past school year? SA A U D SD

Reflection:

6. What has been the most rewarding aspect of looping for you as a professional?

Any other comments, thoughts, suggestions, ideas are welcome.
Thanks again for your continued commitment to this research project.

Appendix H

Parent Looping Survey – 2000-2001

Dear Parents:

I would like your input in regard to the 7/8th Looping program at the Upper Grade School. Please return this survey using the self-addressed envelope by June 25, 2001. This survey is anonymous and your participation is voluntary. Please circle A for Agree, D for Disagree, or U for Unsure in response to the following questions about your child being with the same teacher(s) for two years.

My student enjoyed being with the same teacher(s) for two years.	A	D	U
My student enjoyed being with the same classmates for two years.	A	D	U
Starting the 8th grade was less stressful for my student.	A	D	U
The 8th grade was less stressful for me as a parent.	A	D	U
I had a better understanding of my child's education after two years with the same teacher(s).	A	D	U
At the beginning of 8th grade, my student better understood what was expected of him/her.	A	D	U
The teacher(s) better understood my student's strengths and needs during the 8th grade year.	A	D	U
The summer between the 7th & 8th grade school years was less stressful for my student.	A	D	U
I felt more comfortable communicating with my student's teacher(s) during the 8th grade year.	A	D	U
If I had to do over, I would choose looping for my child.	A	D	U
I would recommend looping to other middle school parents.	A	D	U
I support looping at the elementary grades (1-5).	A	D	U
I support looping at the middle school level (6-8).	A	D	U

Other ideas or comments are welcomed:
(use back of page if needed)

Thank you for your time on this survey. Information from this survey is confidential and your participation is voluntary. I appreciate your assistance with my dissertation project.

Appendix I

Looping Survey for Parents – 2001-2002

Dear Parents:

I would like your input in regard to the 7/8th Looping program at the Upper Grade School. Please return this survey using the self-addressed envelope by March 25, 2002. This survey is anonymous and your participation is voluntary. Please circle SA for Strongly Agree-A for Agree-U for Unsure- D for Disagree-SD for strongly disagree in response to the following questions about your child being with the same teacher(s) for two years.

My student enjoyed being with the same teacher(s) for two years.
SA A U D SD

My student enjoyed being with the same classmates for two years.
SA A U D SD

Starting the 8th grade was less stressful for my student.
SA A U D SD

The 8th grade was less stressful for me as a parent. SA A U D SD

I had a better understanding of my child's education after two years with the same teacher(s).
SA A U D SD

At the beginning of 8th grade, my student better understood what was expected of him/her.
SA A U D SD

The teacher(s) better understood my student's strengths and needs during the 8th grade year.
SA A U D SD

The summer between the 7th & 8th grade school years was less stressful for my student.
SA A U D SD

I felt more comfortable communicating with my student's teacher(s)
SA A U D SD

If I had to do over, I would choose looping for my child.
SA A U D SD

I would recommend looping to other middle school parents.
SA A U D SD

I support looping at the elementary grades (1-5). SA A U D SD

I support looping at the middle school level (6-8). SA A U D SD

Other ideas or comments are welcomed: (use back of page).

Thank you for your time on this survey. Information from this survey is confidential and your participation is voluntary. I appreciate your assistance with my dissertation project.

Appendix J

Looping Student Survey Responses

Student Looping Surveys - May 2001 & March 2002

Responses 224 surveys - 168 positive - 39 unfavorable responses

Describe thoughts & feelings about starting 8th grade

I felt very happy starting 8th grade with the same teachers. I knew them and didn't have to get to know any teachers.
It was cool. I knew everybody. It was nice to know everyone - not a lot of mix-up of names.
It was easier than starting with all new teachers, you knew "boundaries" and "limits"
I felt comfortable and settled right in on the first day.
It felt like I was in 7th grade again.
I was easier than getting new teachers.
I liked that I had the same teachers because you know them and know what to expect, so it was easier.
It was easier because I already knew them.
You knew what was wrong and right.
I was happy I looped, I felt comfortable starting again, it was much easier.
It was the same as we had the same teachers.
It was great because you have absolutely no stress going back to school for the first time - a lot more comfortable.
I felt like I had a good relationship with them already - it made me feel more comfortable.
It was the same as if we had a long break.
It was cool because we don't have to learn new teachers expectations - this was way better then 6th & 7th grade.
It was easier knowing what the teachers were going to expect from you.
I was disappointed because I like getting to know new people - I was looking forward to that.
I wasn't nervous.
The first couple of days were easy, I wasn't nervous.
I liked knowing where I was going.
I felt fine, I didn't have any pressure on me.
I loved it! The same as any other day of school.
I think it is better, you don't have to be nervous, no worries.
While I was comfortable knowing people and teachers, it's nice to have to know new things also.
It was good to know the teachers.
It was a normal feelings but it seems like we got to know them better and what to expect.
You didn't have to try to figure out their personalities.
They already know your personalities & what type of work you are capable of doing.
It was better to see some familiar peers.
I thought it was cool because I already knew my teachers and did not have to be shy.
The first couple of days went well - it was very good.
I liked the idea of the same teachers but I wished Mr. W was back and not at another school.
Cool, relaxing - not having to worry about new teachers.
We started learning right away, they knew our names.

What you like best about middle school...

I liked that we looped (what they liked best about middle school)
I wish I could have had my teachers for all three years.
The people.

Do teachers recognize your strengths?

I know they know recognize my strengths because they know who I am.
They know me as a kid and person and not just a student.
Yes, they help you out more.
They do most of the time, I deserve what I get.
A couple of them do because of looping.
Yes, because they have worked with us for two years.
Yes, because they have complimented me on them.
Yes, they see my grades.
They know us and our expectations.
Yes, because I talk with them a lot.
Yes, I get the grades I deserve.
Because they have helped me build my strengths.
They like to talk to you about your strengths
They've seen them for the past year and a half...
They know me from year to year.
I knew who they were and they react to things.
They were great, it's much easier starting with teachers who know you and your capabilities.
My teachers have been able to see and know what my capabilities are.
They know us well and know our work.
Yes, because they get to study us for 2 years.
They usually try to bring out the best of my strengths.
They know me and how I act.
They tell me I know I can do better
Yes, as least one has come out and told me how well I've been doing on the work.
In math, my teacher says I can go far in my future.
Yes, because they love to help out.
Yes, because they write good comments on my report card.
They are not afraid to ask me to take on extra work.
Yes, I do because if I don't goof off, I do good.
They know my strengths better than I do!

Has having teachers for 2 years been good for you?

It has been good for me to have the same teachers for 2 years because we can start off where we left off.
They have more chances to get to know you.
It has been good but also bad at times.
They know what to expect from you and they're disappointed if you do worse than normal.
Yes, they know where to start & what level you're at.
It made it easier - it was good for me.
I think it has because I know the teachers and feel better. I am not nervous.
Yes, I know how they are now and I know how they get mad.
Yes, because they know what I'm capable of.
Yes, because you don't have to worry about having new teachers.
It's easier when you don't have to start over with new teachers.

Yes, because we're comfortable with them.
I am more comfortable around them.
They know me and how to help me.
It has been fine, I am learning.
Yes, because you know what your limits are.
Yes, you can get started on work right away, you don't have to spend the first week getting to know each other.
Yes, you know how far you can go without getting in trouble.
You don't need to get to know a teacher.
I didn't have to get used to a different teacher and their way of teaching.
Easier, you knew how they act.
They know us and we know them.
They know how to handle us because they know us.
They know I'm a good student already and I don't have to prove my ability over and over again.
We don't have to start all over with meeting & getting to know new teachers and expectations.
You don't have to make drastic changes in your routine.
You get to know how they grade - they also know your strengths and attitudes towards things.
Yes, because we grow in the teacher/student relationship - they know you.
The teachers know our abilities so that they don't push us too hard.
They know you and you know them. I can also gauge what type of homework and things I'm going to get.
It allows them to be more in-depth.
They know my strengths and weaknesses.
I already know what the teachers expect work and behavior wise.
Probably yes, because they know our problems (academic) so that the next year they can work on them more.
No, if you were talkative in the beginning of the year it is hard to change their attitude because they know you.
I've become closer talking with them more and asking for help.
You don't feel as pressured the first couple of weeks because you know the teachers.
Yes, you are not scared of your teachers.
They know me better than other teachers.
I think so because they started teaching right where they left off.

Relationships with teachers

The teachers & I trust each other and the teachers have seemed to notice me more.
I think that it has been a good relationship.
We're not afraid to ask questions and we feel a lot more comfortable around them.
The more I got to know them the better the relationship.
Mostly professional, a few are on a more friendly level than others.
Our team of teachers had a good relationship with the students because the teachers know more about them.
I am better behaved than I was in 6th grade.
With a couple of the teachers if has grown everyday, however, with some it has fallen.
I have a great relationship with my teachers.
I feel that the teachers know the students better.
It's gone very well for the most part they know you so they respect you.
You get to know them on a personal level.
We have good relationships they know lots about you.
They're like friends in a way.
It's very good, I feel comfortable talking with them and asking for help.
We all know each other, like a huge family.

It's been a good experience.
We are comfortable with each other.
We all like each other.
I think spending every day with my teachers is good.
I think that we have grown to know each other better.
My teachers help me a lot as I have problems with my work.
It's been good, they understand you and help you out with problems.
They understand me better & how my learning process is.
I think my relationship with the teachers is a lot better than it would be with new ones.
I have good relationships, they like me, I like them.

Relationships with students

We know how to approach certain people better, we knew them, and more about them.
It was alright, we know each other more.
We all know each other it's kind of like one big family.
Mostly everyone gets along.
My friendship with my friends is better than last year, because I know them better.
You get more time with your friends so you know them even better.
I have gotten to know all of them better.
Everyone seems to like it.
Were closer than ever.
I went through a dramatic change with my life, I have better friends and don't get in a lot of trouble.
They are stronger than ever.
I know them well and I don't hate anyone & I don't think that they hate me.
You can start a conversation with anyone even if they are not your closest friend.
You are friends with everyone. You are closer then you were last year.
They are all good.
They are all friendly to me.
I know everyone, I may not like all of them, but we do know everyone so it isn't awkward when working in groups.
My classmates are awesome. They like me and I like them. We all usually get along.
It's great, I have more time to get to know people, I made friends a lot more after being in class with them for 2 years.
We all know each other well and get along.
We all felt comfortable coming back.
We all know each other pretty well.
It gets more fun the second year because you know everyone.
I have gotten to know more people.
Probably stronger because we've been together for so long.
Relationships have gotten stronger because I'm getting not as shy.
My friendships are more stronger and I have more friends.
I made more friends by seeing them for 2 years and I know lots of people better.
You get the chance to do projects with your friends and have more to talk about.
All of the kids get along with me.
Good, but stronger relationships than before.
I have good relationships with most of my classmates.
I have made some great friendships by looping.

Talk to teachers about personal issues? Appendix J

I feel that I can talk to any of my teachers. They are all nice people & will listen to my very important personal issues.
I would talk with Mrs. D..she's up beat, sweet, kiddish, and very cool, nice.
I could tell my prime time teacher anything - I feel really close to her Mrs. Sch.
I could probably talk to my teachers if I wanted to.
I don't like sharing my feelings with anyone but my mom.
Yes, I feel OK talking with my teachers.
Yes, because I feel comfortable around them.
Yes, I could talk to several.
I don't normally talk with teachers about my problems with other people.
Yes, I would talk with Mrs. S. she has good advice and I trust her.
Yes, because they know a lot about us.
Mrs. S. she is a respectful person to talk to.
Yes, I believe we have a good relationship.
Mrs. D. I can trust her and she gives people her opinion and shares her personal issues, too.
I do feel comfortable talking to them, I know them and I trust them. I would talk to all of them.
I would feel OK talking to anyone of my teachers about anything.
I feel that I could talk to Mrs. S about issues because I know her well & she seems understanding.
I think if you have a teacher you really like you can talk to them.
Yes, Mrs. Sch because I see her the most and she has kids so she would be the most experienced.

Grades

Grades are better because I've grown to know how well they want or expect things to be.
Yes! I'm glad you asked that question. I set goals for myself - I wanted to get a 4.0 & I did!
My grades are kind of better because I study more.
They are definitely getting better because I understand and do my homework.
Yes, I have a comfortable feeling, no pressure.
Grade are better because I tried harder and like school better.
I am trying harder this year so grades are better.
They are better because I know what the teachers want from me.
I have paid more attention this year.
Yes, I am used to the teacher's expectations now.
You already know theor expectations.
Yes, because I'm listening better & concentrating harder on school & work.
Grades are better this year because the teachers know my work & what grades I should deserve.
Teachers know me better and they know what I can do & they try to make me do better.

What I liked best about looping?

I liked knowing everybody.
You didn't have to have new teachers in 8th grade & you felt like you were on a short break.
I know the teachers better.
I knew my teachers.
I know the teachers understand me.
Not having to start over.
We know everybody and they know you.
We know them better and can start the year off good.

They know you and know what you can do.
You knew what the teachers were like and their standards.
Not being nervous going to school.
No worries, not being nervous about school.
Didn't have to learn the teachers names ans we already knew if they were the type you could joke around with.
They know me and what I like and who I am and how I act.
Having them know I'm respectful and hard working - not having to prove myself again.
You feel more comfortable.
You don't have to worry about what they would say if you couldn't get your work done.
You get to know your teachers better.
You already know what they're like, funny or grouchy.
Knowing the teacher's expectations.
They never had to explain any of their assignments because we already knew their expectations.
They all had the same rooms as before I knew where they were.
I already knew how they taught.
I got to be with my friends again and fellow teachers.
The fact that I didn't have to work up to my teacher's standards because I was already there.
I knew my teachers and what they expected,
Expectations were clear - you knew what to expect from them.
My teachers understand me more and I'm not shy around them.
I knew everybody better than last year and get along with them better.
Having the same teachers and same friends.

Suggestions about looping...

I would have a survey of people who wanted to loop and those who didn't.
I think it should be done again, it's good for most students.
Yes, I think we should have it again.
Nothing, it's great.
Make sure you liked your team last year
It was great and fun.
Let the students decide if they want to loop or not.
I think it should continue...
Teachers should expect something new from the students, not assume they know you because of your last year's grade.
Mix around the teachers.
I would not change anything.
Choosing the teachers you want to loop with.
To have 1 teacher for each subject - I had 3 teachers for 5 subjects.
To have the same students be on the same team both years, some went back to the other team.
Give a chance to be with all of the teachers on the looping team that you didn't have last time.

Transition Issues

I'm scared - I don't want to leave my friends, I'll lose the closeness
That I'll have to adjust to everything - teachers, sports, friends, etc.
Nervous about teachers & homework.
I'm nervous - the school is so big & I won't know anyone.
I do not like the idea at all.

I am wondering what it is going to be like and if I will be separated from my friends.
Nervous but excited, I hate starting new, yet there's a challenge.
It will be different and hard.
Kind of scared due to bomb threats and guns.
Scared because of new people.
I am excited to get on with my life and forget my past.
I know that I am prepared.
I don't want to be at the bottom again.
I don't want to stay here, but I don't want to go there, either.
Nervous I won't find classes.
I'm looking forward to meeting new people but will miss it here.
Excited but scared.
I think the teachers should loop with us.
I'm a little nervous about the amount of homework and all of the kids.
Teachers who helped me.
I'm excited about the extracurricular classes and hope to succeed.
Scared, but it's best to move on....
Getting to know the teacher well.
I'm going to try harder.
I can't wait because now it counts for something and that motivates me.
I may not be ready for it...
I think it will be fun, I will miss the teachers I know very well.
Moving up to the big leagues - scary and nervous.

Most helpful in your success...
That you felt like you knew classmates and teachers better so the learning wasn't hard.
The student/teacher relationships - they are really patient!
The teachers.
Teachers and parents.
Knowing and getting along with people.
Getting help from teachers.
Knowing the teachers...
Feeling comfortable about asking for help.
Getting to understand more.
Getting teachers that like you.
Teachers that explain things well.
My friends, teachers and family encouraged me to be better, work better, and do better.
Paying attention in class and doing all my projects early.
My teachers supporting me.
Teachers being there for you.
I feel more organized this year and that helps.
My teachers understanding me very well.
Knowing the teachers and what they expect out of you.

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